your move, instigator (draw your weapon and hold your tongue)

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by Laysan_albatross

Summary

“We are still under wartime policy,” the recruiter had told her parents. He had an envelope in his hand. He sounded sorry. “She has two parents who are successful ninjas. We would be remiss to overlook her potential based upon that alone.”

The Third Shinobi War never ended. Konoha needs more soldiers, grabbing anyone who can fight, especially those who can't say no.

- Inspired by [Restricted Work] by Dovey

Chapter 1

Mission 1755C43B: Patrol the western front at grid coordinates [REDACTED] and establish personnel presence at civilian villages and eliminate agitators – reports expected qD or PRN via summon.

The Academy never told her how squishy eyeballs were and how easily they popped like the hard, strawberry candies papa used to buy for her on Thursdays or balloons like those floating to the ceiling at Ino's last party. The fluid that dripped between her fingers was clear, but when mixed with blood, made pink, her favorite color – like her hair, like candy. Ninjas in Konohagakure were very silly about eyes. Clanless Bekko-sensei could talk a lot about dojutsu and kekkei genkai and how easy it was *to steal DNA anomalies and you must all burn the body or retrieve the organs in question or else you will all be in very big trouble for dereliction of duty*. And then, he would place his hands on his hips and look at the class sternly like they already made such unforgivable mistakes.

All the Uchihas in her class went on and on about activating eyes and turning off eyes and using eyes and black eyes and red eyes. Sakura's eyes were green like the leaves outside her bedroom window during springtime when the sun streaked through them just right. The eyeballs that she was holding weren't any of those – they were Hyuuga eyes – light purple. *Lilac.*

Haruno Sakura had never ran this fast or this far or this long ever in her life. It took three kawarimis and a genjutsu fake field of poison traps and lava pools and sizzling exploding tags before the enemy nins stopped chasing her. It was hard to see because her eyes hurt from the wind; it was hard to hear because her heart was loud in her ears. The sun had gone down during the first fight, so at least it was easy to hide in the long shadows, but it also reminded her that she needed to find an adult.

She didn't find the outpost – the people at the outpost found her by the river while she was rubbing at the blood that had dried between her toes. "Young miss, you need to identify… Haruno-chan?"

She squinted and saw blond hair. "Yamanaka-san?" Then a face emerged; she brightened, "Ino's dad! Hello," she bowed, "are you the outpost guards?" There were two other grown-ups with him, both with long and spiky hair. She clapped her hands together in giddy relief. Ino's dad was so kind he would sneak her pieces of candy behind mama's back. Ino's dad was so strong he could carry both Ino and Sakura on his shoulders at the same time. Ino's dad kept looking at her hands; she looked down too. "Oh. The other one popped," she mourned.

She offered them to him, but he didn't hold out his hands. Nobody said anything for a long time. Then, one of his friends coughed and said, "Report." She straightened.

Bekko-sensei would say *Report* and then hit you with a stick if he didn't like your report. Everyone in class had to present at least once. *Report. Report. Report. Report.* Kiba was hit the most for complaining that Bekko-sensei never wrote down what makes a good report. But

which type of report? End mission type? Support request type? Time sensitive type? If everyone else was dead, did that mean she had to give the report as the team leader? Can you be a leader of nothing? Yuuto-sensei was supposed to… Yuuto-sensei has a pattern of kunai in his back arranged in a nice perfect circle. “Mission 1755C ummm 43 ...B? A? We did everything the scroll told us to. But then there were Iwa monsters and Kaito-sempai called for help and no one came.” She rolled the flattened eyeballs in her hand, “These are from Neji-sempai.”

“Kuso.” One of the adults picked her up and placed her on his hip - just like papa. He must have kids too. Sakura stared at his face – *Nara* she guessed – maybe. “What now?”

Sakura shrugged and then realized that Nara-san was talking to Ino’s dad and the third friend. “We need the report – she’ll have to write it.” Ino’s dad answered, sounding sad, “That was the team with Hizashi’s kid.” Then they spoke about adult things. “Who do you think is authorizing these missions? Did her parents allow this to happen?” Sakura shook her head.

Her parents didn’t let her join the Academy, no matter how much she had begged and pouted. The civilian school just taught boring things like reading and basic maths. Ino and all her friends were at the Academy doing all that plus cool things like kunai throwing and jumping from tree to tree.

Sakura had won in the end. *Shannaro*! Sort of. One evening, there was a knock on their door, interrupting dinner. “We are still under wartime policy,” the recruiter had told her parents. He had an envelope in his hand. He sounded sorry. “She has two parents who are successful ninjas. We would be remiss to overlook her potential based upon that alone.”

Wartime policy. Like how the stores stopped selling yellow spices from Suna and bamboo hats from Iwa. Papa’s neighbor complained about the *lack of good iron in these parts*. *What then am I supposed to make pots out of? Clay? Petrified wood?* Posters began showing up on public buildings and telephone poles: hand-brushed drawings of Iwa monsters with sharp teeth and long claws eating babies. Kiri kappas drowned their victims in open pits of water dragons, reaching for lilac pupils. Other posters showed a group of stout Konoha farmers climbing a hill surrounded in red swirls of lava presenting a basket of fruit to the sun. *Buy Local! Buy Konoha!*

“You are running a daycare,” mama had said. Her words had hit the recruiter so hard that he turned white and left. But then the next day, papa got called off to a two-month long mission, and mama was summoned a week later. A smiling kunoichi arrived with another envelope the third day Sakura was left alone – the smiling kunoichi walked her to the Academy.

Nara-san took away her eyeballs and sealed them into a scroll. The third friend brought back some freshly picked berries. Ino’s dad fed her something that looked like a candy bar and tasted like dirt. She wasn’t hungry. “There was a plum tree outside by the marker. Did you see? Can I get some flowers for Ino-chan, please?” Sakura asked between chewing and sips of water.

“Of course.” He paused. “Tomorrow though. You need to sleep now.”

That night, Sakura dreamed of eyes popping like balloons at Ino's last party. Ino laughed and danced as she was showered in that familiar clear fluid and her dad looked on sadly from the doorway.

Mission 1788D82C: Clean floors of the Konoha aviary. Payment to be given to team leader and distributed with his/her discretion.

She flicked fingernail sized bird droppings at the back of Uchiha-sempai's head and sniggered in the corner with Kiba when Uchiha-sempai failed to notice the white slowly dripped from her black Uchiha hair onto her blue Uchiha shirt. Uchiha-sensei saw them; luckily Sakura saw him smiling behind his hand before he turned away. He wasn't a good Uchiha. Every other Uchiha besides sensei was like a statue. *For practice for when one of those bastards finally end up on the Hokage mountain* – Kiba had said - *The shopkeeper that sells the kendama told me that they're doing bad things to get there.* Kiba's mom had slapped his head and told him to stop talking about politics.

"What now are you laughing about?" Uchiha-sempai asked with her scary face which stopped being scary after Uchiha-sensei started making faces behind her on their first day as Team 14 together. "You two are so annoying! Why can't you guys behave?!"

"Relax, Izumi-chan, or else you'll get wrinkles," Uchiha-sensei said. "You're not much older than them." Then he waggled his finger, "However, the faster you work, Sakura-chan and Kiba-kun, the faster we can all get out of here. Let's all work together, yes?"

"Hai, Uchiha-sensei," Sakura clasped her hands in front and bowed. Kiba echoed her words.

"Shisui-kun! Why do they listen to you? You're not much older than *me*!" Uchiha-sempai whined as Sakura hastily swept her corner into a dustpan and trotted over to the sack that Kiba held open at arm's length. His dog sat in the corner sneezing until an hour later when they finished. Sakura wiped a hand over her forehead and made a face at her sweaty palm, squinting at the rising border of sunlight. The chamber wasn't sparkling clean, but all the floor and the four walls were finally grey and not spotted white.

"Maa Maa," Uchiha-sensei clapped his hands and reached into his vest pocket, "Good job. We're done here." He took out two packages, "The reward. Go home and have fun. Your parents are waiting for you. Report tomorrow at 0900 hours at the lobby of the Administrative Division. Now shoo."

Sakura's pockets were filled with folded ryo which rustled as she skipped down the town square proper. Kiba trotted alongside with his dog in his shirt, complaining again about his sister's cooking. Sakura silently agreed. It was rude to say out loud, but Hana-san likes the taste of burnt meat and overly salted miso soup and natto on rice. Then the wind changed direction and blew at them from the market, "-and ma wouldn't be back from her mission till tom…" Kiba stopped; he sniffed and pointed, "who's that?"

On the other side of the street, walking towards them, was a woman and a boy their age – *mother and son*. He was carrying a bag of tomatoes with great care. "Is that a trick question?" The pair was, without doubt, from the Uchiha clan like Uchiha-sensei and Uchiha-sempai:

black hair, black eyes, slimmer bodies than most of the villagers, high and large collared shirts with a fan sewn onto their backs.

“No, you idiot. I mean - Of *course* they’re Uchihas. Like cats. So. So, I mean - that lady is the matriarch.” Sakura made an ‘oohhh’ sound in understanding. “She talked to ma last week about 'predetermined affirmative ratios' and ‘sector quarantines,” He stumbled over the syllables. “Hana-nee told me that she blew up in front of the Council when they took her son to the north border. There was a lot of exploding shurikens and crying and then a bunch of old people showed up and, you know... So, if her son is out of the village – who’s that? I thought we already worked with all the Uchihas our age.”

The Uchiha matriarch meandered from stall to stall, tugging the boy along – staying just long enough that Sakura was beginning to wonder if she heard them gossiping. Ninjas have all sorts of powers – if Uchihas have special eyes then what’s stopping them from having special ears? She didn’t look angry – but she was a grown-up and grown-ups love hiding their feelings. Grown-ups love lying too. Like when Hyuuga-sama told her at the Hyuuga compound gates that he wasn’t mad at her when she apologized for Neji-sempai’s death and then asked her to limit her presence for at least two years.

Uchihas hid their children within their clan compound, only releasing them into the village when they were good enough to graduate from the Academy in one year. The boy looked like the matriarch but all Uchihas kind of look liked each other anyways. Papa had once mentioned the matriarch as a woman who was *a formidable fighter, pity Mikoto’s clan requested her to stand down to raise children. They could’ve at least placed her in a trainer role. I’ll never understand politics.* …Children. Sakura fiddled with her cash, counting out enough to buy a stick of dango, “maybe Uchiha-sama has more than one son.”

“Why would she send out her first born?” Kiba frowned, stroking his dog’s head. First borns are heirs. Second borns are spares. Everyone followed that rule in all the Hidden Continents. It’s why Kiba was on her team and none of the other clan kids their age. And then there’s this Uchiha.

“Politics.” She said sagely, mimicking papa’s tone as she stroked her imaginary beard. Politics. Like when the clan adults talk by the Academy about the war and rations when they were waiting for classes to end. Or when the Hokage and his old friends made speeches to the village about the Will of Fire. Even the poster on her bedroom wall of the Yellow Flash, taller than Sakura, a gift from Ino, that was pointing outward, looking so cool and heroic, with the words beneath – *Don’t let your potential waste! Serve the village in every capacity!* Or how Ino’s dad had to correct her words on her last mission report not because they were spelled wrong, but because *they just aren’t spoken to our superiors – I mean, they make your bosses mad, Sakura-chan. Please don’t write Hyuuga-san’s last words regarding his opinions about his clan. Please.*

Eventually, Kiba turned left while she turned right. She finished off the last of her dango as she arrived at her front door and hoped. Then, she tried the handle – unlocked - she had forgotten to lock it this morning. She peered in. “…Tadaima?”

But no one was there.

Mission 1832C05B: Subcategory: Courier. Deliver low-risk letters to the citizens of Uenohara. Anticipate unskilled bandits. Payment given at the municipal postal service. Rendez-vous with third teammate (designation: 012573 – [REDACTED]) at destination.

--- while he tried to control his ever-weaker chakra. "If there's such a thing like true peace, I will find it at all costs. And I won't ever let go of it. I won't give up."

Their glances met, while the leaves of the trees danced in the wind ---

Sakura glanced up from her book when she heard Akamaru bark in alarm. Shisui-sensei groaned as he stood, leaving two rusty-red handprints on each pant leg, and parted the bushes, just in time to reveal Kiba, naked and retching his lunch, by the river, bloodied clothes and armor surrounding him half-cleaned. She quickly turned back to her book, but her mind did not calm down enough to let her read.

It had been Kiba's first kill. The group of eight men and women had fallen upon them earlier in the morning, thinking that they were civilians. Sakura had started stabbing at Achilles tendons (*where the calf muscles meet at the heel bone – nick that and you essentially fell your opponent, ideal targets for kids your size)* with her brand-new, balanced kunai, while Shisui-sensei made sure they stayed down. While everyone was fighting, Kiba had challenged the bandit leader and Shisui-sensei allowed it, probably thinking that this was a good learning opportunity. But neither he nor Sakura expected Kiba's fighting style to be so… well, most Inuzukas fight with their claws. Kiba, on the other hand…

"My jaw almost fell off," he had bragged afterwards, "because I opened it so wide trying to get that bad guy's throat." He puffed up his chest, "Nee-chan would be so jealous. She didn't get her first kill until she was nine." Then, he threw up onto his shirt. He has thrown up a lot since.

The fires wilted into embers into a small column of smoke. She pulled the sack of envelopes closer to her side and imagined herself tossing each message into the fire. Eventually, the bushes rustled behind her again and she sensed a flash of chakra; it tasted like red and black. "Shisui-sensei," she poked at the ashes and refused to turn around, "I read that swallowing too much blood causes," she jerked a thumb behind her just as Akamaru barked again, "that."

He knelt on her right, close enough to the fire that she could only see his outline of black. "I keep repeating myself. Please do not call me sensei," he laughed, rubbing the back of his head, "You make me feel so old."

But you are old. Sakura thought but wisdom held that comment fast on her tongue. "A sensei teaches. You taught me how to make more than one bunshin at a time. You also taught me better grammar for my reports." Unlike Ino's dad who switched from teaching her grammar to teaching her politics, accusing her of making her reports *inciting on purpose. The consequences would be dire if the wrong people read this, you know that? Here, let me erase your observations on the discontentment of those villagers. See? It's still true. And no one would be mad at you for it.* Yamanaka-san tried his best. Sakura's truth was more truthful than his truth. He probably knew that but didn't want to think about it. (Grown-ups are great at lying.)

“Really?” Shisui-sensei stuck a pinky into his ear, “I wonder what the Academy taught you, if they didn’t show you basic writing and the standard three jutsus.”

Clanless Bekko-sensei once brought in a straw manikin and a couple of kunais to class, had the students stand in a line while he took their hands that held the kunai, and drew lines across the neck, the armpit, the torso. He added sound effects of exaggerated blood loss to make them laugh. That class was the first time anyone had touched a sharpened kunai – it was heavier than Sakura had expected. “Other vulnerable areas include the underside of the jaw, the eyes, behind the knees, the Achilles tendons. Keep in mind the different anatomies associated with different bloodlines. For example, Iwa’s Explosion Corps has many members who generate their attacks through their hands – attack the tenketsu points of the palm and you effectively render them disabled.” Bekko-sensei’s hands had old, white scars but no calluses – they shook when he held them still. “Don’t forget the quiz tomorrow about the major arteries of the body. You are dismissed.”

Sakura glanced down at her book: *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja*. She used to draw little flowers in the margin; now she drew eyes with big and small pupils and pretty eyelashes at the corners and a thick optic nerve trailing behind. “There was a lot to learn and not enough time.” Little girls serving in the war didn’t get to learn how to read. She used to have problems reading jutsu scrolls before Yuuto-sensei and Neji-sempai sat her down and walked her through the hard and long words.

“There is not a lot of time for a lot of things,” Shisui-sensei said as Kiba stumbled back to camp, smelling faintly sour and metallic. “To bed, you two. We’ll meet your third teammate tomorrow.”

Their new member was, according to the mission scroll, finishing her six-month duty as a sleeper agent in the Uenohara ryokans. There new member must be older and more experienced and smarter and just so much better. “What if she doesn’t like us?” Sakura asked.

Kiba snorted, “Who cares. Anyone is better than Izumi-baa.”

“Izumi-san is preparing for the chunin exams with her new team,” Shisui-sensei said mildly; Kiba crossed his arms as his cheeks were ruthlessly pinched. “She has a good chance of advancing. Even if she doesn’t make it to the finals, I’m sure our Hokage would grant her a field promotion.” He sighed and muttered, more to himself than his students, “I don’t think she’s ready.” Sakura winced. “Nobody wants to rise in the ranks during wartime unprepared, Kiba-kun. It means that there is a space needing to be filled and undesirable missions to finish, for good reason.”

“Ano…” Sakura hugged her book to her chest, “What about you, Shisui-sensei?” He raised an eyebrow. “You said ‘your third teammate.’ Are you also being promoted?”

Shisui-sensei leaned over to ruffle her hair, “You’re partially correct, super smart Sakura-chan,” he said over Kiba’s cries of dismay, “the Hokage has seen fit to reassign me to the border. I’ll be switching places with a dear friend of mine and he will be here to take over. You’ll learn much from him – he is the most talented shinobi I know for his age. Please treat him with the respect you have given me.” He leaned back, pillowing his head on his arms,

“Your third teammate’s name is Tenten. I’m sure she would be happy to meet the people taking her back to Konoha. I’ll take first watch. Now go to sleep.”

Tenten. Sakura thought, tasting the name, trying to attach a face to a name. Her stomach leaped and danced. Next to her, Akamaru snuffled into Kiba’s jacket and yawned. *Tenten…*

By high noon, Team 14 reached their mission objective and delivered the package. Tenten waited by the west ryokan’s doorway wearing a light green qipao styled blouse and standard pants, tapping her foot against the wooden steps. Introductions were made, succinct and with care – as if disrespect would cause Shisui-sensei to withdraw Tenten’s orders to return home, forcing her to stay in this small town for another half year. Sakura wanted to hug her and ask for her hand in friendship but… “Come on, kids,” Shisui-sensei sighed, “She’s only a year older than you.”

One year was such a long time – so much more knowledge and experience and wisdom were to be had in one year. Tenten touched her hair buns to check for loose strands when Sakura and Kiba did not stop staring. “Wel-welcome, Tenten-san!” Sakura bowed, “to Team 14!” She extended her book in offering, “This is the unofficial book of Team 14. Please, read this, understand, and take care of us!”

Tenten took the book and slowly began to flip the pages. “You’ve all read this?”

“It’s OK,” Kiba wrinkled his nose. Sakura stomped on his toes.

“You don’t like to read. I like the book!” Mama read it to her during bedtimes and again and again and again, even repeating her favorite parts with all the voices and dramatic flourish. Sakura had once mentioned wanting to look for the author to get an autograph, but mama told her that was not going to happen. Ever.

--- “But Naruto…”

“Renge is our comrade. It makes no difference what the old man told us. I will defend Renge at all costs,” exclaimed Naruto, laughing.

Tsuyu started crying once again. ---

Tenten tilted her head. “Lots of fighting?”

Sakura shrugged and tried to act nonchalant. “Yeah.”

Tenten then hugged the book to her chest, like Sakura often did at night when she was alone in her family home. She held it like other kids do toys. She probably did not own many things she could hug. “Then I’ll treat this book as if it is the most precious thing!” She exclaimed, smiling. “Please, no formalities. If I’m to join Team 14, then call me Tenten-chan.”

Sakura beamed back, jumping in place from happiness, and couldn’t stop smiling even though her face was beginning to hurt. Behind her, Kiba started whining about feeling hungry and Shisui-sensei sighed about *the antics of children*. Sakura didn’t care though. Despite yesterday’s killing and fighting and Kiba being gross and today’s villagers being too scared to

talk to her or sell her things – she now has a new friend and her new friend so cool and likes her.

Today is a very good day. *Shannaro*!

Mission 1859E17E: Orientation with new team leader (designation: 012210 – Uchiha Itachi). Establish expectations, objectives, training and mission schedules, etc.

"Our new leader is Uchiha Itachi?!" Tenten hissed as they waited in the clearing of Training Ground 3. Sakura grabbed the scroll from her hands to read. "Why are they saddling us with the clan heir? Kiba, you're part of the main branch of your clan. Did someone request him?"

Kiba whistled, low and long, "No way. Ma doesn't need to baby me. Maybe Uchiha Itachi needs a break from all that fighting on the north border where Shisui-sensei said he was covering." He glanced at Akamaru who whined, "you think sensei's going to be OK?" The three of them exchanged glances, not willing to explore Shisui-sensei's possibility of dying on the north border. Was yesterday the last day Team 14 would ever see him alive? *Did he even say good-bye?*

Tenten coughed. "Well. The only person we can get as a team leader more infamous than Sharingan no Itachi would be Sharingan no Kakashi." She leaned in, spinning a kunai around her finger, a habit she indulged in while pondering, "You know, Uchiha-san actually stayed in Uenohara for a couple of days while I was there. He saved me from a couple of Kumo nins when I ran out of shurikens and…" Tenten pursed her lips: she didn't like talking about her time in Uenohara. Uenohara was why she got uncomfortable sleeping near doors or in sparsely furnished rooms. Sakura tried to imagine Tenten and Uchiha Itachi taking their last stand back to back, surrounded by Kumo enemy nins and their pet nekomata, glorious and patriotic theme music playing in the background. "He didn't talk about why the Uchiha sent out their first born and kept his younger brother."

Sakura eagerly raised her hand, "I got to ask papa about it yesterday," she announced, eager to contribute, "He said that the Clan Head Fugu-something pissed off the elders because the clan wanted to veto the new 'sector quarantine' politics," Her teammates nodded as if they understood. It's OK. She didn't get it either when papa tried to explain. "So, the elders graduated his son and placed him on the front lines without a jounin-sensei or even a higher ranked leader."

"Which elders? Clan elders or the council elders?" Kiba asked.

Sakura shrugged, "Both? He said that the matriarch was so mad at Fugu-something that he's demoted to the 'dog house' and then she went up to the Hokage to argue about the clan heir's recruitment but that went even worse. Remember Kiba? You mentioned this before. Shurikens and explosions. And lots of crying." *Mikoto-san has been coddling little Sasuke-kun since. Please, Sakura-chan, I told you to take off your headband in the house, you know I don't like to see it. Especially when I go back out and see all the other kids your age still safe in the Academy.*

“So, how was he?” Kiba began scratching Akamaru’s head, “Uchiha Itachi. Is he nice? Mean? More like a no-fun Uchiha-Uchiha? More like Shisui-sensei?”

Tenten chewed on her lower lip, “He’s good, like, really good. He was courteous but sort of distant. I think he’s awkward around girls, or with people in general. Yeah. Really good. Really awkward.” She set aside a couple of scrolls and took out her blade sharpening kit. “Have you heard of the rumors? Apparently, he killed a Kiri jounin that ambushed him at a ramen stand with a pair of chopsticks.”

“That’s nothing. Hana-nee told me that on his first day at the border, he saved three chunins from the A-B tag team of Kumo and forced them to retreat with their tails between their legs. *Fact*.”

“Don’t give me that crap. Your sister’s having you on. What else did she tell you?” Kiba sputtered incoherently. “Come on, I’ve heard most of the lies. Did your sister tell you that he got forty marriage proposals before the end of his first month because of how many princesses he saved? Or that our jinchuuriki personally taught him how to make a bijuu ball? Or that he was the one who crafted the Yellow Flash’s original three-pronged kunai and gifted it for the birth of his first son?”

“Well - you don’t know that! Hey, stop laughing! I’m going to beat you up! Sakura, let me go!” Sakura shook her head, digging her heels into the grass as Tenten continued to cackle *ohohoho* behind a hand.

Then, the quick burst of wind and leaves heralded a new arrival. Sakura’s grip slackened and Kiba, with the sudden lack of resistance, stumbled forward. Tenten straightened with her kunai in reverse grip. Standing before them was a teenage boy not much younger than Shisui-sensei wearing the standard Uchiha high collared shirt under his flak jacket, without any other embellishments on his uniform, black hair pulled back in a low ponytail, black eyes.

Sakura felt heat rise from her collar to her ears as she, in her mind, tilted her head in interest.

He’s… He’s really pretty!

He stared at them for exactly one minute. “My name is Uchiha Itachi. You are Team 14.”

“Yes sir,” Tenten answered in a measured tone.

“Good.” He placed his hands behind his back in an old-man position. After a few beats, he said, “we should do introductions then. One by one, please tell each other your name, likes, dislikes, hobbies, and dreams for the future.”

His request was met with utter silence. *What.* Why did it sound like he was reciting from a script? Why did his whimsical statement partner with such a morose facial expression? Why did it seem like he was copying from someone else’s personality that did not match his? *Really good. Really awkward*. After their initial evaluation session, far away from their new leader, Kiba would burst out, “That was the worst entrance I’ve ever seen, of all time,” and his teammates would agree, cringing and pitying Uchiha Itachi in turns. He just didn’t know how to start (or hold, as Team 14 later found out) a conversation.

Just like that, all that coolness *sugoi desu ne* aura around him began to drip away like water off a duck's back, leaving behind gloomy, socially stunted teenager. Despite his talents and skills, Uchiha Itachi was still a boy prone to social anxiety. Kids like Sakura and Kiba could smell weakness like bloodhounds to a scent and relentlessly make fun of their victims until they refused to leave their houses. Thankfully, Tenten elbowed Kiba before he could open his mouth. Shisui-sensei made them promise to be nice. The general atmosphere whispered incredulity: *are you serious?*

Uchiha Itachi didn't seem like someone who had many friends. He was a prime target for bullying. *But Shisui-sensei made them promise to be nice.* "Ano…" Sakura hesitantly raised her hand, "We already know each other. We can just start training right now, Uchiha-san."

If Uchiha Itachi was any less of a ninja, he would be fidgeting under the incredulous stares of children the age of his little brother, but instead he stood stoically. He jerked his head once in an approximation of a nod, "Good idea, Haruno-chan." Sakura winced at the use of the casual suffix with the formal family name. Then he pulled out a pair of tiny silver bells.

"Uh," Kiba leaned back as if they were destructive and volatile weapons. "What is that?"

Uchiha Itachi didn't smile, but the air around him became charged, and his audience twitched, "A test."

Chapter 2

Mission 1859B17B: Review status of Team 72A at Ame territory grid coordinates [REDACTED] against [REDACTED] with mission goal - to eliminate all the members of the Takeda family including household staff.

Konoha rains were all the same, like the long rows of chunins marching out of Konoha in the mornings, always three hours long, hard and fast, never twice in a day, never more than a day. Ame rained like infiltrator specialists: mist, fog, drizzle, vertical, diagonal, horizontal, windy, sunny, lightning, hot, cold, downpour, flood. The civilians huddled under store awnings as they donned their rain wear: oiled boots, pants, cloak, and triangle hats. Uchiha-sensei had bought Sakura a pink umbrella with a yellow squinty eyed *nyah* cat printed on one side and sent her out to canvas the town while he taught the rest of her team how to chakra-walk on the flooded grass fields.

Sakura, with her near perfect chakra control, didn't need to participate in the remedial lessons. Instead, she wandered the streets like all the other street kids with an Ame umbrella, buying Ame snacks, humming Ame tunes, playing in Ame puddles. *Splash. Splash. Splash*. Her boots squished into the mud in one of the potholes – like eyeballs. *Squish*. She reached down and grabbed a fistful, watching the brown ooze between her fingers. Then, she wiped her hand down on her coat and watched as her new Ame friends ran past her, caught up in their own games, leaving her behind.

The only Ame ninja she had spotted in this town was the grumpy shinobi leaning against the front gates looking like a drowned version of her umbrella cat. He was alone. There had been a Team 14 meeting over how to proceed to avoid attention. Sakura and her teammates wanted to bury his body and then replace him with a clone. Sensei believed that stealth was enough to slip by the Ame ninja's attention. He had that sad grown-up face when he pulled rank after they outvoted him. So, the Ame ninja still lived, still standing by that gate, rain-wet and bored out of his mind.

The mission scroll wasn't clear on how to find Team 72A. 'A' was for ANBU. *Leader is Farmland Fox Lightning* was the only clue written on the supplementary footnote. Uchiha-sensei didn't help either – he had made that Uchiha grunting noise that could mean anything and tossed her out the door of their inn.

"Look for signs. Report back before noon." Uchiha-sensei had ordered as Kiba sank his toes into the wet grass and cried in disgust. *Squelch.* The door closed. Above her head among the cabling, eight crows flew in small circles.

So, Sakura wandered and searched for *signs*. Like lemon blossoms for discretion, mint for suspicion, watercress for patriotism, thistle for warning – lots and lots and lots of thistle. But Farmland Fox Lightning probably wasn't a Yamanaka because Ino told her that Yamanakas in ANBU take up flower first names and so wouldn't be communicating through ikebana. "The *Hanakotoba* art had to be changed to fit more ninja words because before, it was all about love. It's terrible now. Sasuke-kun needs more love. He needs to smile more. He needs

more flowers," Ino had commented as she drew out pages and pages of diagrams comparing and contrasting the uses of various plant extracts with a tongue poking out of mouth, color coded with pink and baby blue and lilac - and scattered them across her bedroom floor.

Maybe Uchiha Sasuke-kun just needs his brother like I need mama and papa – Sakura had wanted to say. But Ino's dad was downstairs and his ears were sharp.

Signs could be unique graffiti on abandoned shops or the angle of the fan that a courtesan waved in greeting or someone lingering just a second too long by the ramen stand. She scoured the village and retraced her steps in case she missed anything. Maybe all of Team 72A died. ANBU was dangerous. People in ANBU die. How was Sakura supposed to know – she couldn't flare her chakra because Uchiha-sensei wanted the Ame ninja alive and she couldn't climb the walls because the only people more watchful than enemy nins are nosy townspeople. Bekko-sensei never taught her how to look for clues in a sneaky way; he said that she didn't have the *eyes* for it. *Should've called for Retrieval and Disposal instead of Team 14. Cha! This mission is so stupid* – she grumbled as she turned into an alleyway and stared at the various drunkards lining the walls.

Wait. Her instincts perked up in interest.

...That one. With the spiky hair and the stained eyepatch.

She approached the drunken man, fourth from the street corner, dodging his halfhearted swipes at her rain boots ("…little brat. Get.") and tilted her umbrella forward, allowing water to sluice onto his jacket. He glared balefully up at her. His eyebrows were dyed black. His sleeves were tailored close to his wrist in a Fire country style. He had old callouses along his fingers and palms – kunai callouses.

She nudged his body with her toe and whispered, "Eto… Farmland Fox Lightning?"

The group (*murder* – Tenten would later correct her) of crows above her head suddenly cawed loudly and, as one, swooped down, talons angled toward her head. She yelped and drew her kunai, Konoha make (*Buy local! Buy Konoha!)*, one centimeter shorter than Ame's standard kunai, ducking under two senbon that were aimed at her neck. She brute-force pushed her chakra through to her hands despite the wash of killing intent, fumbling the seals for a kawarimi, but then the drunken man, who obviously wasn't that drunk, wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close, flaring his chakra in code: *Mission. Safe. Leaf. Ally. Negative - Stealth.*

Sakura allowed her body to fall limp as she was tossed into a nearby pile of trash as voices appeared with many gusts of wind. *Shunshin*. "Shit! Hatake's with the girl!" *Hatake. Farmland Fox Lightning. Hatake. Farmland. Hatake Kakashi. Sharingan no Kakashi.* "Call the alarm! I said – call the fu---" She heard metal against metal and smelled the memory of a split wild pig over a camp fire, sizzling under its own rendered fat drippings. Her hair stood on end – static – crack – boom.

And it was over.

Sakura crawled out of her hiding place, breathing in the sour of rotting cabbages and hamburger steak. Her umbrella was ruined; she tossed it aside. It was still raining. She sneezed, wrinkling her nose as all five of her senses *tilted* from an area of effect genjutsu. The eight crows sitting by the window sill shifted and merged into a someone. She squinted through her soggy bangs, "Sensei?" His eyes were red.

"Mahh," Hatake-san drawled through his high collar, "For a second there, I thought Danzo gave me a field genin. Glad to see you, Itachi-kun."

"Danzo?" Uchiha-sensei narrowed his eyes further. "I had wondered." He turned towards her, "Good job Sakura-chan," he praised and ruffled her hair – a textbook compliment to build team moral. Still, for the token effort, she beamed back wider than necessary.

"You can try a little harder to show appreciation," Hatake-san remarked, leaning down and staring at Sakura with a half-lidded eye. "Hmmm. You're Naruto's age."

Sakura blinked. *Naruto? The Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja*…???

"And you've heard of me," Hatake-san continued.

Sakura wordlessly shook her head, trying to hide her face behind her kunai. *Sharingan no Kakashi. Copy nin Kakashi. Friend killer Kakashi. Student of the Yellow Flash. Only son of War Starter Sakumo. Last of Clan Hatake. The clan's history is a cautionary tale, Sakura-chan, remember the lessons they impart: do not act with reputation on the line, do not go to war with blood on the line, do not enter the political field a lone wolf.* "That's enough," sensei pulled her back.

"At least you're protective. You'll need to show more initiative than that, though. Danzo loves kids like her for reconnaissance and patrols. You'll need to treat her like your little precious Sasuke-kun." Hatake-san stepped back and locked his hands behind his head. "Saaa. Lead the way, kohai. We have a couple of days before Hanzo gets suspicious and we need to discuss your next mission in Kumo - though now I have doubts about your success seeing that you have yourself such a… pink apprentice."

"I have teammates too," Sakura corrected him and sneezed again.

"Oh?" His dyed eyebrows raised into his hair line. He turned to Uchiha-sensei, "I am so sorry."

Sakura bristled. *I don't like Hatake-san.*

Uchiha-sensei ignored his comment and dispelled the area genjutsu. "The Takeda family was contacted by our daimyo as an intermediary for ceasefire negotiations. The Sandaime knew this..." Hatake-san tilted his head. "Sempai. I know I must obey but, the conflicting orders… and preparing for Kumo. My students aren't nearly ready for the chunin exams." Sensei protested as they sealed the bodies into body scrolls (the burnt meat smell stayed), adjusted their disguises, and walked back to the main roads.

“None of that matters,” Hatake-san replied – which – Sakura didn’t even know what that *meant.*

She kicked a pebble and watched it roll towards a stop by sensei’s heel. Maybe next time, Uchiha -sensei would tell her about the undercover Ame ninjas wandering the village instead of letting her and her teammates suggest killing the one obvious enemy bait like a bunch of idiots because their sensor skills weren’t good enough. Maybe next time, Sakura would be a plan-er instead of a react-er. Maybe next time, Sakura would understand the *underneath of the underneath*.

Her stomach growled. *I’m hungry.*

Mission 1872A02SS: Operation Kumo Crush. Participate in the Kumo chunin exams. Instructions to Team 14: Refer to Protocol Troop Movement 4AK and await signal to attack.

Team 14, made up of baby field genins collected during wartime, failed the second survival and free for all part of the chunin exams. It was expected, and nobody cried foul when, on the fifth day, Tenten had flared her chakra in surrender and a proctor whisked Team 14 away to the safe zone just before Akamaru got cut in half by a vengeful and howling Kumo genin with chakrams after they beheaded one of her crane summons. Kiba sulked in the corner of their lounge with a little raincloud floating over his head. “I bet we could’ve passed if we didn’t have to save our strength for the *actual* mission.”

Tenten shushed him as she pulled her wakizashi over the whetstone louder than necessary. “Be quiet, will you?” She stared meaningfully at the corners. Akamaru barked in agreement.

“I don’t think we could’ve.” Sakura noted softly, burying her nose into *The Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja*. “We still suck a lot.”

> *--- “Oh well then it is okay to annihilate a small village just to demonstrate to others one’s manpower?” blurted Naruto. Shu looked at him unwavering. “Don’t you realize what you are talking about there? Human lives are at stake! Is it really alright to kill all the people of a village?”---*

“Mama will be glad I sucked,” Sakura added. Mama had started loudly crying when she saw Sakura among the chunin hopefuls during the orientation. It was really embarrassing. *Beloved daughter? Sakura-chan! What are you doing here? What will your father say? Who sent you here to participate? Why couldn’t I stop them? Oh, Sage, help me. I-I-I am a terrible mother.* And then Ino’s dad who oversaw the battalion that included Team 14 had appeared for debriefing and then mama just… wailed on him. *SHE’S INO’S AGE! WHY ARE YOU LETTING THIS HAPPEN?! WHY CAN’T YOU STOP THIS?! MY CHILD! MY CHILD! SHE’S MY ONLY DAUGHTER!!!*

“Yeah, Hana-nee will be happy too.” Kiba slumped against the wall.

Tenten glanced up, “Your sister is here? I didn’t see her.”

He shrugged, “She wasn’t close. I don’t think she wanted to talk. She didn’t want to be like Sakura’s mom and dragged away,” then he concluded, “because she sucks and everything sucks.” Because wartime recruits with potential get bumped into the field. An orphan with storage scroll and weaponry proficiency? An Inuzuka spare with a closer bond with his ninken companion than most clan members twice his age? A little girl with near perfect chakra control who was the daughter of two respectable chunins without an ounce of political weight between them after Haruno Mebuki got kicked out of the Allied Mothers Force? They couldn’t steal her faster. Sakura used to brag to her teammates about being wanted by the village because at first, it was nice to be fought over like someone valuable – now though…

There was a woman, hair like blood, trying to peak over Ino’s dad’s shoulder through the doorway into their designated lounge. “Come on, Inoichi-chi! Are those the kiddies everyone has been talking about? Mina-chan wanted to meet with them for~ever ya know and Naruto-kun needs more playmates but Mina-chan was like, nooo, security risks, as if I couldn’t just beat up any of his bullies or kidnappers!” Past Sakura would’ve beamed happily with the subtle praise. Present Sakura had turned slowly around and hid herself further behind the book.

“Please, Uzumaki-san. Your presence here is complicating matters further.”

“Pah! Don’t let the elders ruffle your feathers… ehh?” She peered closer at Ino’s dad, “Did someone cut your hair? …Ohhhhh, I see. I see.” She grinned carelessly, like a mother who has successfully kept her own child out of the mission roster short list. “I told you paperwork in Konoha moves too slowly! Mito-baa, bless her soul in the afterlife, found out that bureaucracy moves thrice as slow as soon as she tried to get me onto the better chunin missions and list me as priority for care! Requests were lost and signatures were painted over ya know. It took months! Then Mito-baa marched over to the office and gave them a piece of her mind. Ohohohoho. That was a great memory.”

“I had submitted in triplicate.” Ino’s dad cried. “I don’t under how they lost every copy-”

The door closed.

“That was weird,” Kiba announced into the silence.

Tenten suddenly wailed, leaping to her feet so suddenly Akamaru fell back, alarmed, with four legs wiggling in the air, “That was the Red-Hot Habanero! She moved so fast and -! I-I didn’t have time to ask for her autograph!” She frantically patted her pockets and started pulling out scrolls, “I think I brought my life-sized poster of her with me.” Kiba stared at her with a *but why* expression on his face. Tenten didn’t notice. “Do you think she’ll sign it? It’s a little bit strange but I never see her in the village and it’s not like I can stalk the jounin lounge waiting for her. This might be my only chance.” After much rummaging, she whipped out said poster and showed it to her friends proudly.

Uzumaki Kushina. The poster said in bolded kanji. The woman had on red war paint stylized into a fox. She reached out to the viewer with a clawed hand glowing red. Her red hair floated behind her, split into nine tails. *Our Heroine from our Famed Allied Clan.*

At least I'm not insane enough to have brought my Yellow Flash poster with me – Sakura thought as Tenten dashed to the door and yanked it open, only to be stopped by Ino's dad's friend, Nara-san.

"Ma bought a poster of herself and hung it in the living room. It's still there. She thinks it's funny," Kiba whispered as Tenten waved her Uzumaki poster in the air and Nara-san continued to shake his head.

"I'm sorry, genin." Nara-san was saying, "She's already gone." Tenten deflated. "Maybe next time." Grown-ups are great at lying.

Sakura joined Tenten's side and stared up at Nara-san imploringly. "But, Nara-san, what if we," she waved a hand behind to include Kiba and Akamaru, "Team 14, want to see our ex-teammate, Uchiha Izumi. I think she's with Team 25 right now? They've all managed to get to the 3rd part. We want to congratulate her. You're not going to keep us here forever, right?" She widened her eyes further.

After a significant pause, Nara-san rolled his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Troublesome. If I walked with you three to Team 25, would you still say yes?" Sakura pouted. *Well, there goes that idea of finding Uzumaki Kushina-san.*

Still… They've been in this room for fifteen days now. Invisible ants ran up and down the inside of her legs from the lack of activity during that time. She jumped in place from one foot to the other. (Tenten had her weapon collection, freshly oiled and sharpened, taking up half the floor space, and the four walls with smaller kunais and shurikens tucked into the team cabinet and two walk-in closets, having won the brief scuffle-argument on seniority and territory with nothing but a roll of paper towels and a cleaning cloth.) *Still…* There weren't any windows in the room, which on one hand gave a sense of security but on the other hand gave no option of escape if things went south via enemy ambush through the only available entrance and exit. "Hai."

Down the hallway, turning left, another left, down a set of stairs, through a high ceiling chamber, Nara-san guided them through the Kumo administration building, taking the long route around areas of high foot traffic, finally leading Team 14 to a door labeled *Conference Room B*. A large walnut table sat in the center of the room, groaning under the weight of back packs and a large otsuchi. Uchiha Izumi stood on the far side in deep conversation with Uchiha -sensei, poking him in the chest so harshly he took a step back. "-no orders until you see the Hokage's signature on the scroll. Only the Hokage's and no one else's… Who…" She glanced up, "Oh, it's you brats."

"Izumi-baa," Kiba greeted, earning a punch in the ribs from Tenten for his rudeness.

"That's sempai to you," she retorted, then she did a double-take. "Wait. Why are you three here? This isn't, like, a real exam set--- Are you part of the mission? Nara-sama, why are they here?"

"They are part of the main operation. As for why," he shrugged, "Team Itachi was picked among the list of available teams. They've asked to see you for nostalgia's sake."

Uchiha-sempai's mouth dropped open into a small 'o' of surprise, "Itachi-kun, you're the new sensei? Where's Shisui-kun, then? Separating him from you isn't…" Then she fell silent, drawing herself up with a deep breath, "Okay. If the little brats wanted to see me, then we will hang out. I will be the picture-perfect host, at the very least. Let me take you to where Kumo's lodging my team. They've set aside an entire block just for Konoha visitors, which makes planning easier but actual scouting not so… I will not say anymore. Anyways, you know what I mean. There's still half a month left before the third part and where did you say you were staying at?"

"We didn't," Tenten answered, "They placed us in a tiny room in this building."

"No windows," Sakura added helpfully.

Uchiha-sempai looked unimpressed as she stared at Nara-san who silently raised both his hands in surrender, "Okay. We will be changing that. Follow me, unless," she glanced at sensei, "do you want them for training or a pep talk? Shisui-kun loved giving pep talks – completely useless tripe like how to be as the swift waters and the unrelenting wind… but that was Shisui-kun."

Sensei scrutinized Team 14 and grunted, "Hn." He reached out and ruffled Kiba's hair, "We cannot go outside to train. Instead, I'll reserve a room where I'll teach you how to circulate chakra and enhance your senses." He gave Akamaru a perfunctory scratch behind his ears and then ruffled Sakura's hair, "When the mission begins, Team 14 is to operate without me." His hand hovered above Tenten's head, unwilling to ruin her two perfect buns, and stayed there for a good twenty seconds while everyone waited for his next move. Finally, he settled by poking her in the forehead, "Look for me tomorrow at 0800 hours. I will be in the general vicinity." And then he shunshined out of the room, leaving behind a whisper of wind and leaves, as if there wasn't a perfectly serviceable door behind him.

In the stunned silence, Nara-san muttered, "geniuses," and excused himself.

Uchiha-sempai rolled her eyes good-naturedly, "Itachi-kun was worse when we were younger," she confided. Sakura could not imagine any scenario where that could've gone worse. "Follow me."

For the next fifteen days, Uchiha-sempai kept Team 14 suitably entertained with an equal blend of outings, stories, wisdom, and warnings. "All my cousins have been asking about Team 14 as if I'm still there. Uchihas come and go on all the teams," she had mused sadly over a bowl of miso soup, "Shuffling us around so that we don't stay long enough to make bonds."

Politics. Sakura stroked her chin, "But what do the adults in your clan say?"

Uchiha-sempai shrugged, "Mom refused to talk about it after the Uchihas upped and left to the village outskirts. She said that roots have ears."

Another moment: two days before the final one-on-one tournament battles, Uchiha-sempai dragged Sakura aside, "I have message for you: your mom loves you." Sakura was taken aback. "Your mom told Yamanaka-sama who told Nara-sama who told Itachi-kun who told

me. She also wanted to apologize," Uchiha-sempai wrinkled her nose, "I have an idea why." Sakura looked down and scuffed her sandals against the burnt grass of their backyard turned training ground. "People have been asking me why Team 14. But now I'm wondering if there is a reason at all. Maybe you have bad luck and people notice when you survive with such luck, especially when you play with your year mates who are still in the Academy. And the higher-ups think – hey, they work, somehow, let us keep using them. And other people think – this isn't right – like your mom and like Yamanaka-sama."

Uchiha-sempai began stomping out the small fires littering the yard and kicking dirt over those that stubbornly remained. "But everyone knows that this is bad," Sakura clarified as she watched.

Uchiha-sempai sighed, "Look. You're a smart kid, smarter than some of the adults. They'll get there, eventually." They walked back into the rented house and locked the doors behind them. Uchiha-sempai leaned down, hands on her knees, until she was eye level. "For now, concentrate on the mission. I… I've heard rumors lately and wanted to relay the message, in case." She swallowed, "If you feel like the ambient chakra in the air is starting to burn, you run. Just remember this: you run away from the kitsune, the nekomata, the ushi-oni, and when chakra starts to burn. Okay?"

Hana-san never visited to Kiba's sadness. Sakura haven't seen mama since her row with Ino's dad; she hasn't seen Ino's dad much outside of the briefings where he passed out annotated maps of Kumogakure *to be destroyed later, do not let anyone know that you have this on your person*. Sakura even made her own notes of specific sector quarters. For 96B, she had written: *Nicer civilians. Family from Kuso. Cute dog.* The streets by the village center was labeled - *Yotsuki clan. Very mean. Hates Konoha.* By the Tailed Beast Temple, Sakura wrote - *'Jinchuuriki-sama.' Bakayaro, Konoyaro. Bad poetry. Itchy chakra.*

The morning of the final tournament was overcast with low rolling clouds by the mountain side. The air was electrified – as if a predator waiting for the right moment to pounce – or maybe it was just Sakura's imagination. She vibrated in her seat from anxiety and worry. She wrung her hands until Tenten hissed at her to calm down. *Maintain a low profile.* Nara-san had instructed as the battalion reviewed the hour by hour. *Stay undercover until the signal.*

The signal arrived four battles in when Uchiha Izumi struck an Iwa genin in the back with a storm of shuriken. The Konoha audience roared in approval while Kumo and every other nation represented jeered. Blood erupted from the Iwa genin's back as a spray of black feathers….

And then the sky was falling.

Sakura jumped to her feet with her heart beating loud and fast. *This is it.* Kiba gathered Akamaru into his arms with an excited whoop and dashed down the stands past sleeping civilians. Tenten sneezed, brushing off a black feather from her nose and gestured *come on*.

"Team 14 is to operate in civilian sector 96B," Nara-san had announced the day before, gesturing at the blackboard with chalked fingers. "Your goal is to cripple the infrastructure. We want Kumogakure's recovery to be as long and expensive as possible."

Any hidden village is at least half civilian from generations of merchant, labor, and skilled families searching for a place to settle and sell their wares or talents. Any hidden village would be stupid to reject these people whose livelihoods make other livelihoods. If there aren't farmers, ninjas can't eat. If there aren't blacksmiths, ninjas can't fight. If there aren't white-collared workers, ninjas can't get paid. On and on and on – the understated backbone of the economy rested on those who didn't want the glory and the reputation and their images on posters tacked onto little girls' bedroom walls.

Sakura stood in the middle of the street as Kumo citizens without metal headbands or weaponry ran past her in panic with their hastily gathered belongings, congregating at the bottleneck of the sector gates. She imagined the stairs of the stadium behind her as continuous waterfalls of blood from the slit carotid arteries of civilian audiences and low ranked enemy ninjas who couldn't overcome the crow feather genjutsu. Then, she took a deep breath, reached inward, and entered the *zone*.

"It's a branch of zazen with the goal of effortless presence during battle. It is not called the 'zone,' Sakura-chan," Clanless Bekko-sensei had corrected her answers with liberal uses of red pen.

"Maybe you're the one who is doing it wrong and that is why you're still a chunin," she had replied before yelping and clapping both hands over her mouth, mortified. *I don't know why I said that.* She had also thought – *Shannaro! He needs to hear some tough truths anyways!*

Clanless Bekko-sensei's expression hadn't change. "See me after class, Haruno-san." She had ended up sweeping all the Academy classrooms after school for an entire two weeks.

Her pink hair was covered with a loose scarf. She weaved low between open legs, sometimes running on all fours with a kunai in her mouth like how Kiba had taught her. Achilles tendon – always the Achilles tendon. She followed the whooshing sounds of metal in the air (Tenten's activated sealing scrolls) and barking (Akamaru and Kiba), making sure that those down stayed down and those dead stayed dead. She left behind clusters of primed explosive tags slapped onto building foundations. The *zone* gave her greater situation awareness like how Uchiha eyes could read muscle twitches and chakra flow – an edge that meant the difference between pulling her hand back just before a cleaver landed in that exact spot and a sudden loss of four fingers. "Hostile on our ten!" Tenten shouted from the rooftop, hiding behind her hail of senbon, "five hundred meters."

The Kumo genin, the one that forced Team 14 to bow out of the second portion of the exam, bared her teeth when she saw Sakura's tag work on the row of houses behind her. "Monster!" She screamed, leaping forward with glowing chakrams in each hand, "You monster! My summons! My house! My parents!" Sakura ducked under the first swipe and yelped when the second took off a good chunk of her hair, "I'll kill you! I swear I'll kill you!"

Sakura pulsed her chakra and the entire street pulsed once, twice – then - *white*.

Her head rang high pitch like screeching metal. She licked her lips and wetted her mouth, tasting hot ash. At least her teeth weren't broken. Through the quickly dissipating smoke, Akamaru, henged as Kiba with his jacket singed at the hairs, ran to her side, whining when she prodded her right arm and winced: *broken*. "I didn't think it would be that big," she

remarked, coughing. *I need to… I need to find my teammates. Where…?* She delicately stepped over the body of the Kumo genin who had, not on purpose, shielded Sakura from most of the blast. The street block was gone with no piece of rubble taller than herself. This had been a civilian neighborhood. She didn't check the insides for people before activating the tags – there hadn't been time.

…Is this the Will of Fire?

Akamaru kept tugging her good arm, dragging her south and away from the noises of fighting. Sakura turned her head back just as the ground began to shake. A monstrous flaming blue cat slowly rose between two mountain peaks, raised its head, and roared. Besides the two-tailed cat, an eight-tailed ushi-oni joined the nekomata's side, eyes swiveling left and right. The air began to itch. "Akamaru! Where are the others?!" He pointed straight ahead with his chin.

They climbed through broken windows and trekked past a collection of post bad-events: post explosions, post killing, post jutsus, post landslides, post monsters. The skies were black with crows and white, glowing chains; she scratched her arms until she broke through skin, coughing as the air grew heated and the itch grew unbearable. She stumbled, glancing back as she heard a third scream joining the fray.

…Is that the Will of Fire?

Papa used to read out loud news bulletins tacked onto telephone poles on Thursdays while she sat on his shoulders. *Konoha's jinchuuriki, our lovely Uzumaki Kushina, won another round against four-tails and five-tails at the Battle at Red-Crowned Crane Pass. Come and attend our celebration at the town square tomorrow evening at nine where our venerated Hokage and his council will be awarding her and her teammates with medals of service. Refreshments will be served.* Beneath it, someone had graffitied in paint: *9 > 5, 9 > 4.*

"Papa," Sakura had pulled on his hair, "What is a jin-chu-u-riki?"

Papa had turned into the sideroad leading to the stand that sold her favorite hard, strawberry candies, "Well, Sakura-chan. It is like a great human weapon."

She had made an *ooh* sound. "Like a super ninja."

Just remember this: you run away from the kitsune, the nekomata, the ushi-oni, and when chakra starts to burn. Okay? – Uchiha Izumi had said. Sakura couldn't sprint; her left knee was making a weird clicking noise when she swung it forward. She could only limp so fast.

A Konoha shinobi wearing a bandana and twirling a senbon in his mouth was waiting at the extraction point. The senbon stopped when he spotted them, "Eh? It's you," he stated. Akamaru growled. "Hey. Hey. Understood, I'm not delaying." He raised his hands: no weapons, "I got you. Brace yourself, Haruno-chan. Careful. Careful." He picked her up, mindful for her broken arm. "Oh. You're very light."

He leaned forward and took a step – then - the wind stung her cheeks as he dashed towards the Kaminari wilderness where Konoha forces had set up their temporary bases hidden within

Uchiha genjutsu. Sakura caught one last glimpse of the Kyuubi facing Kumo's two-tails and eight-tails, opening its mouth for a bijuu ball, before her vision was swallowed by mountains and thick trees. "They are big," she murmured, petting Akamaru, who had returned to his dog form.

"That they are," the shinobi agreed, gripping her tighter as the ground trembled. She fell asleep for the duration of the journey, dreaming of floating balloons and strawberry candies, waking up when the shinobi set her down on her feet by a large group of injured and dying.

There was a long line for medical treatment. Clan ninjas were, as usual, shuffled to the front, first to be attended. Sakura waited patiently second to last with Akamaru until Kiba found her and dragged her to an Inuzuka medic who was fussing over Tenten's nasty head wound. The medic then hemmed and hawed over Sakura's scrapes, noting *third degree chakra burns on back, cracked fifth and sixth ribs, meniscal tear of left leg, and a compound, oblique, displaced fracture of right arm*. Her cast didn't take away the soreness and didn't allow her to sleep on her side, leaving her cranky and miserable the next morning. They didn't have enough pain pills for everyone. Tenten tried to cheer her up by drawing little hearts and a really elaborate crossbow along her forearm. Kiba drew many tiny ugly cats.

Sakura's report of Team 14's successful mission with all genin members accounted for at the logistics tent was met by raised eyebrows. When she left, she saw mama sitting by a nearby campfire. Their reunion was full of hugs, tears, apologies, and kisses. Mama was clutching a thick handful of blond hair in her fist.

"Do you know if we're winning?" Sakura asked, squirming as mama pushed her bangs away from her forehead, fingers brushing over her hitai-ate, dulled from continuous wear in the field.

The question seemed to age mama many years within a span of seconds. "Little Sakura-chan, beloved daughter, you will eventually learn that no one wins in situations like this."

Chapter 3

Mission: 1888E63E: 4 days in-village paid leave.

She leaned forward, one hand braced against the sink edge, the other holding her foamed toothbrush, straining on her tip-toes on her wobbly stool, and pouted into the mirror. She had accidentally scratched herself in the face again last night. She had dreamed of balloons that popped when she poked them. She leaned down and spat, then bared her teeth at her reflection – *Monster! You monster!* – pink foam swirling down the drain – *Cha. I brushed too hard again.*

She took out congee leftovers from last night and microwaved the bowl. She swung her feet back and forth on her stool, humming as she read the message left for her on the table. *I was just summoned by the Sandaime. Papa will be back from Suna by Friday. Remember to eat all the portioned meals or it's back to the special nutrient glutinous rice flour bars for you! - mama.* The congee was bland with a hint of copper. She poured the last fourth into the kitchen sink, stomach aching from hunger and guilt.

For lunch, she ate a bag of hard strawberry candies she had bought from the stand. The owner had asked where Haruno Kizashi was and Sakura had lied, replying that she didn't know where papa was either before handing over her ryo. She ate half of the bag's contents by the time she arrived back at her neighborhood, reveling in the sweet gush flooding her mouth every time she bit down, imagining each burst of flavor like a firework, nose half buried in *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja*.

She almost walked into another person but stopped short at their ninja sandals and slowly craned her head back: ninja pants, ninja flak jacket, ninja face mask, silver hair, one eye, orange book. "Hatake-san," she greeted with a polite smile and a bow, "You like to read and walk too. Like me."

He smiled with his single eye, aggressive nice-ness concentrated into a fourth of his face, "Ah, Sakura-chan. I'm here to relay a message from Itachi-chan." She tilted her head. "Uchiha Izumi just finished her surgery at the hospital and is ready to receive visitors."

Her eyes widened as she gasped in delight. *Shannaro! What good news!* She would have to visit soon… no, immediately… she'll need to buy a gift and… She glanced down at her half-eaten bag of candies. *Yamanaka Flowers* - She decided. *...Perfect! I haven't seen Ino in a while.* She bowed again, "Ah, thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to relay the message!" Hatake-san waved the hand that was holding his orange book in a *don't mention it* sort of way; her eyes followed the picture on the cover of a happily frolicking man and woman. "Ano," she pointed, "Is that a good book?"

He froze. "Eh?"

She held up *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja*, "I've already read this ten times and sensei is telling me that I need to 'expand my horizons.' Tenten reads weapon manuals and Kiba

doesn't read at all-"

"No," he said before she could finish.

She frowned, "But we like the same author," she protested.

"Saa…" He held the book above his head before she could squint at the title – *Icha Icha…?* "Kushina is going to kill me once she realizes I had this conversation with you," he noted mournfully before disappearing in a whirlwind of leaves, leaving behind a piece of paper with a henohenomoheji.

"Matte," she whispered, glancing around and finding herself alone. "But I have so many questions." *What is your book about? Do you know how I can get the author's autograph? Do you know how Tenten can get Uzumaki Kushina-san's autograph? Why couldn't sensei tell me himself that Uchiha-sempai had woken up? What type of surgery did Uchiha-sempai get? Where were you during the Kumo Crush?* (It's how ninjas have recently been greeting each other. *Hi. Where were you during the Kumo Crush?*) But chasing after a jounin who didn't want to be found was like trying to singlehandedly stop the war.

She gave up after trying to stretch her chakra senses for another two blocks and wandered toward Ino's store, greeting Ino's dad at the counter with, "Mama threw away your hair. Sorry." He handed over the catalog, "What should I get for a really sick person?"

As Ino's dad rung up her order of sunflowers and gerberas for vitality and vigorous health, as Sakura grabbed two balloons and added it to her tab, Ino walked into the store with her clan friends and squealed in delight when she saw Sakura. "Sakura! You don't visit me enough! We must catch up! What happened to your arm? Your leg? You cut your hair! Sakura? Sakura?" Ino patted her cheeks hard enough to sting.

Behind Ino, her dad shook his head. "Ehh," Sakura played with her packet of folded ryo before shoving them in her pocket, "I'm not allowed to talk about it. You can, uh, tell me about yourself then?" She ended the sentence with a questioning lilt. "Like, ummm... How's the Academy? Is Sasuke-kun still cute?"

Luckily, Ino was very good at picking up social panic and gripped onto the almost dying line of conversation. "Sasuke-kun is still very cute. He was grumpy today because his brother was in town but didn't spend enough time with him but even grumpy Sasuke-kun is cute," Ino declared, tossing her hair back. Her dad turned away to give them the illusion of privacy. "Ah, I haven't properly introduced you yet to my childhood friends," she waved a hand at the two boys waiting behind her, "Akimichi Chouji-kun and Nara Shikamaru-kun. Boys, this is Haruno Sakura-chan, remember? She was in our class for a while before they moved her to Bekko-sensei's group."

"Oh yeah," Chouji muttered as he swallowed the last of his chips. "Did you like Bekko-sensei?"

Sakura shrugged, "He taught us a lot," she answered. *He taught us twelve ways to kill grown-ups and eight ways to kill someone our size. We called him Clanless because he did not like being clanless. We didn't understand why at first until we saw how clan ninjas got the first*

pick of the best missions and rations and water that wasn't muddy. (Except the Uchiha clan – but Clanless Bekko-sensei called that problem 'politics' and wouldn't tell us why.)

"We had him for a day when Iruka-sensei fell sick," Ino recalled as they walked out the store and to a street side bench, "Bekko-sensei showed us pictures of bloody stomachs and intestines for 'desensitization.' Half of our class puked in the first thirty seconds. He threw Naruto-kun out the window when he started yelling about how wrong this lesson was." Sakura offered a piece of candy; Ino refused, "No thank you. I'm on a diet. Anyways, the next day, Iruka-sensei blew his top when he heard what happened. We were supposed to learn about how the Nidaime formed basic Konoha law and sought peace between clans. He complained to the Hokage and got it all sorted out."

Sakura was staring at her bag of candies in bewilderment: *Diet? What does that even mean???* – before Ino's last sentence sunk in. "Sorted out? What happened?"

On Ino's other side, Shikamaru leaned back and closed his eyes, "I heard from dad that Bekko-sensei's not allowed to teach anymore. They sent him to the war front."

"Did you see him there?" Chouji asked Sakura eagerly.

Ino snorted and answered for Sakura to Sakura's relief, "Idiot. The war front is not just a little street. There are lots of fronts and it's too big to meet everyone. I saw daddy's map in his office – Iwa, Kumo, Kiri, Suna... It's huge." Sakura popped another candy in her mouth and bit down, sucking at the sweet strawberry flavor. *Clanless Bekko-sensei's hands shook when he showed us hand seals – I don't think he would be a good fighter. I wonder if he's with Shisui-sensei. I wonder how Shisui-sensei is doing…*

"Oh. That is big. Iruka-sensei never told us much about the war. Sometimes he dropped hints when we did well at target practice – he said we were winning," Chouji said thoughtfully, "Hey, Sakura. Did Bekko-sensei do the desensitization lessons with your group too?"

Of course. And if you puked, he'll keep showing the same pictures until you stopped puking.

And suddenly, it was all too much. These people were too much.

She jumped to her feet, suddenly dizzy with anger, "I gotta go," she mumbled through her mouthful of sweets, "I'm late to see… I should go." Because they were clan kids who didn't have to look at pictures of dead people and instead spent their time learning about village history, throwing kunai at still targets, and jumping from tree to tree. They'll be prepared. People who mattered cared if they died. They'll be in a team with a real jounin-sensei going on missions that build up village reputation instead of missions that involve stomachs and intestines. Haruno Sakura was not a clan child. She had a crying mama and an upset papa. She was Essentially Clanless Haruno, like Clanless Bekko-sensei. "I'll see you later, Ino!" she threw over her shoulder – *maybe never.*

"Wait! Sakura! I'm sorry! Chouji, you idiot!"

"What did I say?!"

Sakura slowed down as she turned the corner towards the hospital, balloons trailing happily behind her, sniffing and angrily rubbing her eyes. *They didn't need to know. They didn't have to know.* A friendly nurse directed her to the third floor to the post-surgical recovery ward, past multiple posters with the Wandering Miko posing with two glowing green hands. *Do your part! Save our soldiers! Come to our blood donation drive every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon! Remember to hydrate well!*

She knocked twice at Uchiha Izumi's door and entered, "Good afterno---" her mouth dropped open in shock at the scene before her. With the curtains pulled back, the room glowed with the afternoon light, highlighting the centerpiece. Uchiha-sempai was missing her left leg. Her other leg was covered in so many layers of gauze it resembled a Senju tree trunk. "Uchiha-sempai?"

"No, no, no. Just sempai. Or Izumi-sempai. Well? Come closer." Sakura blushed at her rudeness. Sempai waved away her stuttering apologies, "I should explain. The Kumo Crush… They told me that I might lose the other one too. I have to go back for a few more surgeries to wash the debris out. They're watching for infection." Her bandaged leg smelled like herbs and rubbing alcohol. "It's fine. You at least brought gifts. Look Itachi-kun, your student brought me flowers and balloons."

Sensei melted out of the walls like a ghost in black and nodded in approval at Sakura's presents. He reached out and ruffled her hair, "You got my message." Then, he turned to Uchiha… *Izumi*-sempai, "I must depart now. Is there anything else you would like to add?"

Izumi-sempai cleared her throat and straightened as much as she could on the hospital bed, "If we are ending our conversation, then I want to add this: I'm not ashamed that I'm happy." She declared with a glint in her eyes, "I promise I'll watch over your brother."

His body language was a blank piece of paper - *Good strategy to use if you got caught on the wrong side of the battlefield* - Clanless Bekko-sensei would be proud. Sensei patted her bandaged tree trunk leg and stepped back, "Get well, Izumi-chan" and shunshined out of the room.

Izumi-sempai huffed as the spiraling leaves settled into a neat pile, "He didn't have to go so soon," she complained, pressing her hands to her pink cheeks, "He probably read my mind, could sense that I was trying to gather my courage to finally confess. Maybe it's better that you came before I could start, since he was the one who somehow told you to come; he obviously didn't want to hear it." She mourned, smiling wistfully out the window.

Sakura laid her hand on Izumi-sempai's thigh where it curved into a stump, "I understand," she comforted solemnly and had to explain, when she received a puzzled glance, that "sensei is, like, really pretty."

"I know!" Izumi-sempai wailed, flailing her arms until she pulled her stitches and winced in pain. "He doesn't even do it on purpose – all of his good qualities come naturally but… that price! He needs so much help and I don't know how to give it to him." She laughed and cried at the same time, dabbing at her bright eyes with her hospital gown. Sakura hovered awkwardly with a packet of pocket tissues in hand, "I'll keep my promise of watching over Sasuke-kun. …Did you know that the first time Sasuke-kun saw me, he started crying? He

was just a baby back then! And I get to return to that simpler time while Itachi still fights with all our other clan members. He must know. I'm happy!"

Happy? Sakura tilted her head in confusion.

"I'm crippled," Izumi-sempai gestured at her lower extremities and turned away to blow into her nose, "I'm not talented enough to remain on the roster and there aren't enough resources or time to get me fitted and trained with a prosthetic. I get to stay home and eat my mom's cooking and remain in the village while others are sent to the front to kill and be killed. Is this fair? I'm so ashamed. But I'm happy to not see all those bad things. I'm ha-a---" Izumi-sempai cried so hard that she passed out before she could finish.

The hanging intravenous bag was three quarters empty. The medications for pain, sedation, and infection continued to drip down the infusion line. The heart monitor was steady. Sakura placed the bundle of sunflowers and gerberas among other gifts on the nightstand including a giant stuffed cat and a card saying – *Speedy recovery! Love, Mikoto-san.* The balloons were tied to the back of the visitor chair. Before she left, Sakura pulled Izumi-sempai's covers up and tucked her in.

Today was a trying day; today was also a crying day – Sakura was a wrung-out towel, hanging on the clothesline to dry without tears left to spare. There was a profound sense of oddness that she couldn't properly name but could only explain in terms of events. The price to pay to escape war was a limb or two. The knowledge of war wasn't equal. Some people didn't have to know how bad it was. She wondered if she could cut off her leg without getting into trouble.

She returned to her empty home, opened the faucets of her shower head, and stood under the water for a very long time.

Mission 1888C63C: Organize historical records in the Archive basement with supervisor (designation: 005200 – Yakushi Nono). Report back to mission desk to collect reward and return access badge.

"Precision is key. Focus on the tip of the blade and tighten the edges. Very good. Very good," Yakushi Nono murmured in delight as Sakura's chakra manifested at the tips of her fingers like elongating nails. "The goal of chakra scalpels is to make cuts underneath the skin – but against enemies, you would be succeeding as long as you were cutting. Now, let go." Green chakra faded into black, leaving her breathless with spotted vision. Yakushi-san handed her a ration bar which she gratefully accepted. *Chocolate-strawberry.* "Your stores are very low. You'll need to keep a close eye on your levels while fighting."

Sakura made aborted claw-swipes at empty air, like an Inuzuka, imagining all the ways she could severe Achilles tendons without her kunai, "I can't practice on my friends," she chewed on her lower lip and decided, "but I can practice on myself and then tell the hospital that it's a training accident."

"Haa…" Yakushi-san laughed, patting Sakura's hand, "So eager at such a young age – Just like Kabuto-kun. You forget. There are still plenty of animals in the wild you can practice on,

Sakura-chan. I would recommend you start with fish, then birds, and then work your way up to mammals." Yakushi-san checked the clock and gathered up the manila folders, placing them back onto different shelves, "I'll check your progress tomorrow; if we have time, I can supervise your first forays in the wild."

"I have a mission tomorrow with my team," Sakura said apologetically.

"So eager to send you back out," Yakushi-san murmured, more to herself than to Sakura as they climbed the stairs. "Well then." She laughed again, "It was nice getting to know you, Sakura-chan. You make me regret staying on the Medic Corps instead on becoming an instructor as you are such a delight to teach." Sakura stood obediently as her cheeks were poked red, "A little sponge, you are, soaking up all that knowledge so quickly. Not many can do what you just did." Before she could coo any further, Yakushi-san was interrupted by three abrupt knocks on the door at the end of the hallway.

They weren't expecting guests. *Who could it be?* Not many people have permission to access this part of the building: the Hokage, the head of the merchant guild, the jounin commander, ANBU… Yakushi-san placed a hand on the doorknob, eyes half closed – she inhaled and then slowly exhaled – and stiffened. The air grew itchy. Sakura grew alarmed, "Yakushi-san? Is it bad?"

Yakushi-san's eyes flickered up towards the door and back at her. "Hmmm," her face changed through many expressions: surprise, horror, anger, suspicion, determination, pleasant, pleasant, pleasant. *She's preparing to lie.* "Our guest is an important man, little one." She had a finger on her lips, "There isn't enough time to coach you, unfortunately, for his type… Alas. I want you to be on your best behavior, your very best, alright?" Sakura nodded nervously and steeled herself as Yakushi-san opened the door and pushed, not too fast, not too slow. "Danzo-sama," she greeted with her most polite smile, "Can we help you?"

Danzo-sama. Danzo-sama. Danzo-sama. Did I ever hear about...? Danzo-sama was an old man covered in grays and whites, shuffling forward and tapping his cane on the tile floor, "The Wandering Miko," he replied in a flat voice, "Team 23A reported back from their mission and the hospital is currently short-staffed. Your talents are specifically requested post-haste."

"Understood," she murmured, bowing low.

"And who is this?" His single eye swiveled towards Sakura, "Have you pick up an apprentice?"

Yakushi-san laughed, softer than before, "No, nothing of that sort. We were working on the archives together, finished early, and had some free time, so I decided to show her some of my tricks." Sakura was frozen at the sudden attention and she pressed close against the woman's leg. *Why is he faking surprise? Are we pretending that he couldn't tell that I was here?* Yakushi-san placed a hand on Sakura's shoulder, "This is Haruno-san of Team 14. Sakura-chan, this is Shimura Danzo-sama of the Konoha Council. Say hi."

Danzo-sama of the Konoha Council. Her memory kept poking at her until she mentally snapped her fingers - *Oh yeah!* Hatake-san and sensei mentioned Danzo-sama in Ame. Ino's

dad once cursed Danzo-sama to *the dark soils where the roots stretched beneath the great tree… ah, Sakura-chan, please pretend you didn't hear that.* She swallowed her mouthful of chocolate-strawberry flavored rations, "It is an honor to meet you, Danzo-sama," Sakura greeted with her most polite voice. Danzo-sama was like the creatures hiding in the closets or under the bed, the shadow underneath the crack of light between the door and the floor, growing with darkness and shrinking with light. *He's wearing so many bandages. Is he hurt? He moves like he's hurt. Maybe he's just really old…*

"Haruno of Team 14," he stared so hard with his beady little eyes that she began to scratch her arms, shuffling her sandals against the floor. "There has been pointed discussion regarding you hereabouts. Some people have suggested moving you to another team to make use of your… good skills."

Yakushi-san had stopped breathing. Sakura frowned in confusion, "I don't think I have good skills, Danzo-sama." She disagreed with a serious tone, "I have normal skills. I'm better with my team."

Danzo-sama nodded slowly, "Though the records have proven that to be true, it would be a shame to not try door number two. Your name implies that a special sort of care and training must be undertaken before you can bloom. I have found that to be the case with many of my subordinates. The world of shinobi is filled with a myriad of techniques and I have the most to offer."

"Eto… I don't understand."

"The war continues day after day as certain as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. Those that take advantage of the opportunities continue to live and continue to fight. With more forces on our side filled with the sense of duty and the Will of Fire, not only would Konoha win those harrowing battles, Konoha will do so quicker---" Danzo-sama seemed to believe his long, long, long speech, but Sakura didn't. She had just spent the entire day reading the archives about Konoha resource allotment and troop movements and obituaries and clans asking for special assistance regarding allowances made for re-population strategies and while she still couldn't make sense of the most technical terms, with Yakushi-san helping by defining the hard phrases, she understood the basics.

Konoha was losing ground to Suna. Kumo was crippled by the attack during the chunin exams, like Izumi-sempai without her left leg, but super angry – like a steaming, dancing pressure cooker about to explode. Iwa had retreated to pre-war borders after the Yellow Flash's most recent massacre at Red Valley of Jonquils Blooming but was sending scouts to the smaller towns in Kusa. Uenohara, the town where Team 14 retrieved Tenten, was gone. The updated maps were missing a lot of towns. Mama was right. No one was winning. No matter how many posters informed her otherwise. (Grown-ups are constantly lying.)

While all these thoughts were flying through her head, Danzo-sama kept talking. "--- less tragedy and use those powers to unite the shinobi world." Then, he looked at her as if expecting her to agree.

She laughed after a beat, "you can't unite the shinobi world if you're fighting everyone, silly."

Immediately, Yakushi-san grabbed Sakura's collar and pulled her back. The air grew cold; Sakura sneezed and scratched her nose. "Thousand apologies, Danzo-sama. You must remember her age. She's not fit to understand the wordplay and complicated matters of politics. The intricacies of intrigue escape her. She's so young."

She squirmed under the woman's ministrations, "I'm almost seven!"

"Young," Yakushi-san repeated, struggling to pinch Sakura's lips close. "You can consider Root later for her but from my understanding, you usually don't recruit until they are nine or ten. Please."

Danzo-sama made a *hmph* noise of scornful anger, "I will think upon this," he announced, "I hope that her respect will also be engrained by the time she is of proper age," turning around and leaving. Compared to his entrance, he moved like he didn't need his cane, "inform no one that I was here. I will require a full report from you," he melted into the black, footsteps echoing and fading... fading... fading... Yakushi-san held Sakura tight for another two minutes – and then, finally, she sighed, released Sakura from her arms, and sagged against the wall. She wiped her brow and staggered to her feet, adjusting her glasses.

The long walk to the ground floor lobby was silent, broken only by heavy breathing and the sputtering of a broken air conditioner. Other ninjas passed by, each in their own little world, distracted by their own little thoughts, not noticing that Yakushi-san was as white as a ghost. "That man is dangerous and very close to the Hokage. You must be careful, Sakura-chan, and watch what you say," she urged as they reached the main doors leading to the outside world.

"I am careful!" Sakura whispered back, not quite sure why they were still whispering.

Yakushi-san sighed. "Still too young." Without another word or meaningful gesture, she departed westward - probably towards the Konoha Orphanage, and didn't look back.

Sakura had a sunken feeling that she wasn't going to see the woman anytime soon.

Forget her. There's still one thing left to do before tomorrow.

Alone again, Sakura wandered east to the rows of small shops and bought a bundle of incense. Then, as the sun was beginning to set behind the valley, she headed for the Hyuuga compound, wondering if the grown-ups there still thought that it was her fault that her teammates were all dead. They used to throw words at her like *conspiracy* and *suicide mission* and *traitor* at her, but lately they all had that sad grown-up face when they caught sight of her. No one wanted to admit that their most promising branch member were killed by a mere accident of misinformation and miscommunication and his own choices. Neji-sempai's cousin peaked through the cracks in the gate, innocent lavender eyes wide in fear, whispering, "Tou-san and Oji-san would be mad if they found out that I sneaked you in to see his grave. I'm so sorry, Haruno-san," which made Sakura want to punch the walls with all of her might until they crumbled.

What does an heiress know? Shannaro! She wasn't the one who saw Neji-sempai use his first and last successful hakkesho kaiten against four chunin! She wasn't the one who saw Neji-sempai get pulled into the dirt by an underground Iwa monsters and then get his throat slit.

She wasn't the one who had to push her thumbs into Neji-sempai's eye sockets to pop out… I can visit Yuuto-sensei's and Kaito-sempai's grave just fine at the Memorial stone but I can't with-

But the reaction was expected. Five times Sakura had asked; five times Hyuuga Hinata replied no.

Sakura crept towards a small clearing behind the bushes surrounding the clan compound and knelt, her back against the tall stone walls. She placed her incense sticks on a small dirt pile where previous incense sticks once stood, now stubs surrounded by black ashes. She blew a small stream of flame across the tips and watched as they began to glow dull yellow. She couldn't see Neji-sempai's grave, but she created a good enough replacement.

("It is the way of the world. We are judged by what we cannot change. What can't be changed must be endured. We are who we are, and we must live with it," Neji-sempai had said the week before he died. ...*And yet*)

"Hello," Sakura started, "Umm, good evening, Neji-sempai," and wondered if anyone was listening. "They placed me in a paper-ninja mission right after my break. It was nice. But I have to leave tomorrow. The war isn't over yet – we are still fighting like you said we would." She huddled closer, hugging her knees to her chest. "Neji-sempai, I… I thought about what you said, your predestination and fate stuff. I thought I agreed. But then you died and you chose to die... but you could have gotten away. Yuuto-sensei gave you enough time - and not me since he said that clan children are important, but you said that Kaito-sempai was still behind us and I told you to leave Kaito-sempai and me behind... though in the end, I guess it didn't matter… What mattered was: I should have died. But you chose against my fate. And I think that's freedom."

The incense burned a quarter of the way down, effusing the air with a wooden scent that reminded her of grandmas and moth balls. On the other side of the bushes, a group of kids played ninja tag.

"I think you were wrong," she continued, "You realized it too right before you made your decision, right? You changed things, even the biggest things, with the smallest actions. Because you did that, I am alive." She cleared her throat and took a deep breath, thinking of the Kumo genin who called her monster, of her poster of the Yellow Flash on her bedroom wall, of Danzo-sama and how he made Yakushi-san so scared she turned into a stranger. "No matter how bad things get. I think I can do that too."

Chapter 4

Mission 1902A05A: Apply attached and sealed concoction to the Akai Kori River in Suna territory at grid coordinates [REDACTED] and ensure effectiveness. Recipe owner (designation: 002300 – Orochimaru) requested observations and time of effects to be filled in attached chart.

Team 14 was at first excited for the mission. *A ranked pay without A ranked fighting? Shannaro! An outing! A vacation!* After the initial introduction of the Snake Sannin's green brew to the Akai Kori River and setting up camp downriver, they made sand castles and sand angels and mud balls, basking in the Suna sun until their sunburnt skin began to peel off their noses and ear tips. Occasionally, the loser of janken pon scouted the area for any hint of new, unwanted arrivals, and would find none. All the while, sensei dutifully kept record of the days and the hours. But by day ten of reconnaissance, Team 14 was finding it hard to maintain their initial exuberance and patience.

"So bo-o-oring!" Kiba loudly complained, sprawled by the river side. "Arrghhh!" He flung himself back onto the sand dunes, rolled and wiggled and kicked in wordless anger, spraying it towards Tenten and Sakura who have been trading knowledge on chakra control and weapon storage seals, resulting in both girls crying out in disgust.

"Go away!" Tenten snarled, flinging four senbons in his direction. "What is your problem?!"

"I'm sick of eating rations and dried pork belly and watercress all day and night," Kiba yelled back, ducking under her attack, "We can't even fish even though we're by a river because of this - stupid - mission…!" Akamaru barked in agreement and pawed at the water without breaking the surface. As Tenten fumed, Sakura stared at the clear waters with a hint of longing. Sensei didn't even let her catch any fish for chakra scalpels practice. He said that it was *uncertain if the concoction was a contact or an ingested poison. Instead, we shall practice a suiton chakra technique of pulling moisture from the fog that collects at the peaks of the sand dunes at early dawn.* "We can't even spar right because of all this sand! Ten days and – Nothing. Has. Changed!"

"That is untrue." Kiba yelped and scrambled to the side as Uchiha-sensei appeared right behind him and dramatically snapped his notebook shut, "You need extra lessons in observation, Kiba-kun." He poked Kiba in the forehead with his pen, "In fact, all of you do."

Tenten and Sakura exchanged a glance. "You saw something, sensei?"

Uchiha-sensei nodded and motioned everyone to come closer to the reeds and rushes, "I've noticed several details of significance beginning this morning. With this new piece of knowledge, can anyone tell what I've written down?"

Team 14 strained their eyes and broadened their senses with chakra until their cheeks turned red from effort. "The smell hasn't changed at all; I'll bet that on my shukou and ashikou collection," Kiba tapped his nose. Tenten shushed him and the group fell silent once more. Finally, after five minutes of concentration, Akamaru whined, as if reminding Kiba of some

morsel of information, “Oh yeah! The water striders that Akamaru was chasing yesterday are sticking closer than usual to the river bank. But I don’t know what that has to do with the poison we dumped into the water.”

“Oh!” Sakura’s hand shot up into the air, “Oh! I know this one! This is because smaller insects are affected by the Snake Sannin’s poison faster than bigger animals, but they can escape because they can also drink water from the morning conden-sation like us, unlike the bigger ones like fish and rats which live in the river or drink too much water at one time and then it’s too late!” Then she flushed, realizing that her eagerness caused her usual grip on sentence structures to run away from her.

“There’s more dark foam build-up by the reeds,” Tenten pointed out. “I thought it was frog eggs and tadpoles at first… but that’s the poison, isn’t it?”

Uchiha-sensei looked pleased and gave them their congratulatory head pats. “Good job, everyone, you are all correct. With these notes, I postulate that we can expect continuous progress over the next few days.” Sakura and her teammates perked up in excitement. “During that time, I would like for the three of you to inform me of what you observed and the time of observation.”

“Yatta!” Everyone cheered.

That evening, Kiba hollered that he saw the team’s first dead animal: a desert beetle. Sensei picked it up with two sticks and noted the black foam residue sticking to its legs and pinchers. “I saw it fall onto its back when we were eating lunch and I was watching it twitch all day. It just stopped moving like a minute ago – that’s when I called you guys. I thought it was really cool, right?” Tenten and Sakura readily agreed as sensei sealed the specimen into a scroll.

“Is there anything specific that we’re supposed to be noticing, sensei?” Tenten wondered later as she tended the fire, feeding it more wood and grass, “did the Snake Sannin want us to write about any specific symptoms? And…” She yawned and rubbed her eyes, “What’s he looking for?”

“Orochimaru-sama did not explicitly test his recipes on Konoha citizens,” sensei answered as he handed out blankets and sleeping bags, “To my understanding, he has fed samples to the animals grown in his lab. However, he refused to forward his notes, fearing observer bias in the form of the experimenter-expectancy effect.”

The next morning during Sakura’s watch, before the sun peeked over the dunes, she woke everyone up, excitedly shouting, “There’s a lot of dead fish! And kangaroo rats! And horned lizards! Come see! Come see!” She had water-walked and pushed a species of each to the shore with her sandal, rolling their bloated bodies over so that they faced the clear sky. “Their eyes are all dark.” Kiba and Tenten *oohed* and *ahhed* as sensei quickly sealed those away with the beetle from the day before.

Tenten sliced a water reed across the stem and squinted at the cross-section. “No black,” she announced, throwing it over her shoulder. “Weird.”

“That still doesn’t mean that we should eat or even touch the riverside flora.” Sensei warned. “We’re keeping with Orochimaru-sama’s recommendations.”

“Yeah. I know, I know…”

The day after that, a dead vulture floated slowly past their campsite, wings spread and catching the river flow, black tar coating its feathers and oozing out of its opened beak and eyes - there was no white around the pupils. “No, Akamaru,” Kiba held his dog closely to his chest, “Don’t try to smell to the foam. Getting close enough to smell is too close.” Akamaru barked and licked his face.

“Akamaru isn’t stupid,” Sakura scratched the dog’s ears, earning a lick to her fingers.

“Still.” Kiba didn’t look happy, eyeing the river suspiciously; he cuddled Akamaru harder. “How many more days are we staying here, sensei? We know it’s working. I want to go home.”

“Until we see a plateau in its effect.” Sensei answered as he sealed the vulture away. “As long as the size and species of animals affected keeps changing, Team 14 will be staying put.”

The next few days, Team 14 brought in more birds, rattlesnakes, foxes, fence lizards, and moles which then became coyotes, jack rabbits, and antelope goats. All had foamy black oozing out of their eyes, ears, mouths – as if drowning – all were sealed neatly into scrolls. Whereas Kiba had days ago observed a lack of smell, now everyone gagged on the putrid quickened rot, corresponding to the green/purple/black bodies bobbing past in the black waters that fell apart as they were pushed toward the sand. Team 14’s uneasy chatter turned into uneasy silence when the parade of wild animals turned into recently shorn sheep, goats, and cattle – livestock animals.

“Weren’t there two civilian villages between where we started and where we are now?” Kiba asked as they watched flies circle and land on a spotted cow’s swollen black tongue, their little legs getting trapped in the black residue.

Sakura scratched the back of her head, “I think that was the point of the mission.”

“Oh… OK.”

People followed the next morning. Civilian men, women, and children so bloated they looked like they were minutes away from popping. *Like balloons and eyeballs.* Sensei sealed them away. Suna nins began floating by within the next hour, hitai-ates gleaming in the sun. Sensei sealed them away too. The three of them stood by the banks in silence for hours on end, holding hands in silent vigil, their version of a memorial to citizens from an enemy nation. Sakura imagined her small hill of incense for Neji-sempai, wondering if Team 14’s prayers were all these people were ever going to get.

Kiba interrupted her thoughts by squeezing her hand, “Neh, Sakura. That guy over there.” He pointed to the far side where another group of bodies were being carried by the currents. “He kind of…” Sakura craned her neck and stood on her tip toes to get a better angle. Flak jacket, ninja sandals, darker skin, sideburns --- “Um… Where did you say your dad was stationed

at?" Without thinking, with a rush of fear and dread, Sakura pushed chakra into her legs and released, reaching the other side in two leaps.

Suna is a big place, a huge place. Papa's team could be anywhere in the country – not just along the Akai Kori River. There are other rivers and towns in the desert with undercover Konoha ninjas. Kiba is just making a bad joke and I'm going to hit him hard later for scaring me. Village intelligence isn't allowed to make a mistake as big as an inter-mission cross-fire poisoning accident.

But that's how your old team died… Misinformation and miscommunication.

Tenten and Kiba were shouting her to *stop*, shouting for sensei to *hurry and come, Sakura isn't right…* Her blood pounded hot and heavy in her head. Flies buzzed and whined by her ears. It smelled like death. Sakura approached the group of four bodies, twitching when the sunlight caught the reflection of four Konoha hitai-ates. *No… No, please. Mama will cry again and this time she won't stop.* Five senseis appeared around her: one for each poisoned Konoha ninja and one for Sakura.

"Papa?" There was no response. She peered closer. "Papa? Is that you?" Stubbled chin (that tickled when rubbed over her cheeks), dull wet purple hair sticky black (to pull on whenever she had a question), broad shoulders (to carry her around town, usually towards her favorite stall that sold hard, strawberry candies).

His eyes were black.

They should be blue.

"Papa?"

Mission 1904E33E: Mandatory psychiatric leave awaiting Yamanaka approval to return to active duty.

"Do you know why you are here?" Ino's dad asked her as they sat side by side waiting for the receptionist to call her name. As her temporary guardian, he was signing her permission forms and filling out her paperwork since she had problems reading all the legal-word-jargon. Because papa was recovering in the hospital with small daily doses of the Snake Sannin's anti-poison and sleeping medicines. Because mama was… well, mama was in prison because mama got mad again.

"Because I need therapy," Sakura answered obediently, playing with the worn edges of *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja* and swinging her legs back and forth, staring at everything but Ino's dad's sad face. White ceilings, white walls, white doors, white seats, blue skies, *black eyes*…

"You should have had at minimum weekly psychiatric visits during your breaks starting four months ago. Uchiha Shisui had signed you and your teammates up but none of you attended." He sounded disappointed – as if it was her fault for not showing up. "Uchiha Itachi had fast-tracked your application based on dire need. We're still working on Tenten and Inuzuka Kiba's profiles."

“No one told us,” she sunk down into her chair, channeling Kiba in rudeness, “how were we supposed to know?” *You should have… Should.* “A lot of things *should* have happened,” she added meaningfully. The accidental poisoning of Konoha ninjas resulting in the death of two of their own *shouldn’t* have happened. (*At least it wasn’t papa*.) The Hokage appeared in papa’s patient room on the second day post-mission to apologize and offer *sorry* money. But he didn’t mention how papa’s mission didn’t even exist on official paper. Mama had searched for the records.

Ino and Sakura overhead last night Ino’s dad telling Nara-san and Akimichi-san in the Yamanaka main house study room that *this had Root’s fingerprints all over. Also, why is Team 14 still being assigned to missions ranked higher than low-risk Bs? My request should’ve been processed weeks ago – I have the confirmation signatures right here! Not only that, how many other teams are on missions they aren’t suited for? Akimichi Doto informed me last week that Team 17 returned from Taki with casualties – a first generation and an Uchiha, both nine years old. S-ranked mission. Why is no one is mentioning the Uchiha’s missing eyes, taken before the clan could receive his body? How often is this happening? And right under our noses. Kuso! What are we missing?!*

And then Ino’s mom had caught them and got mad at them for listening in on *sensitive affairs*.

“Mama should probably be getting therapy too,” Sakura mused, tapping her chin. Ino’s dad grunted.

Mama had exploded in the town square while the Hokage was giving a speech on ninja bravery and asking for a moment of silence for those who sacrificed their lives for the war. She had marched up to the front of the crowd and asked the Sandaime why he stopped handing out missions in person – *was he too ashamed to look at his people in the eye anymore, knowing that he sent out his men and women to meaningless deaths. My husband, Haruno Kizashi, was meant to be a genin; he is not skilled enough to be promoted to chunin – but people were needed to fill in spots and so they grabbed a man of low consequence. My only daughter does not even know what she is fighting for and yet she’s already lost track of her own kill count! She is six! Look me in the eye, Hiruzen, and tell me the truth! Tell me why!*

Sakura already visited mama twice in jail: once to ask how to cut an onion without crying and once to ask how to use the knobs and buttons on the kitchen pressure cooker. The guard was a masked boy probably Sakura’s age who offered her drawings of caged birds. “Papa is still alive,” Sakura had updated mama as she picked at the bars with her nails, paint flaking off in small particles, “but he hasn’t woken up yet.” Mama had moaned as if waking up from a bad nightmare. Sakura had reached out past the bars and patted her hand, “I think you’re brave for saying all that. Nobody else did.”

“You coming here isn’t going to change anything, Ugly,” mama’s guard had told Sakura.

“You staying here isn’t going to change anything either, Bird,” she had snapped back.

His grip on his ink-brush had spasmed. “The birds are supposed to be you.” He patted the multiple drawings of caged birds into a neat little pile and handed them over to her to peruse.

Sparrows, cranes, egrets, ducks – all behind locked bars. Whorls of ink, artsy-flourishes, northern Fire country patterns... - *wait* - like a light bulb turning on, she suddenly recognized his style. *He's the one drawing all the posters on the streets, and my poster of the Yellow Flash, and Tenten's poster of the Red-Hot Habanero, and the hospital's poster of the Wandering Miko.* "Like the branch-Hyuuga on your dead team. You should always look forward. Don't come back here. For the good of Konoha." He sounded like Danzo-sama.

"Why aren't you my therapist?" Sakura asked Ino's dad when the receptionist called her name.

"I'm your guardian, Sakura-chan. It would be a conflict of interest."

"But I trust you." *Sort of.* "I'm supposed to trust my therapist, right?"

"It doesn't work like that." The receptionist called her name for a second time. "I've assigned you to Yamanaka Santa, a trusted member of my clan. He's a bit young but I think in this case, you work better with adults closer to your age. Be good. I'll wait for you here when you are done."

The receptionist walked her past the nurses' station and handed her off to a male nurse who was only a little bit older than her, with a white ponytail and large glasses. He recorded her weight, height, and vitals, tutting over how light she was, and offering a couple of Yakiniku Q coupons. "And here we are, Room 3, Sakura-chan. Please make yourself comfortable and your therapist will be there to see you shortly."

The door closed. Sakura hopped onto the chair and rested *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja* on her lap. In front of her was a cabinet, probably filled with medical supplies. She thought about taking some because the good bandages were getting more and more expensive and she was running low – but didn't because Ino's dad would make her put them back. To the left on the walls was a small eye chart and a diagram of all three hundred and sixty-one tenketsu points. To the right on the walls was a single poster of the Yellow Flash, a different version than the one Sakura has. He was older in this one with more lines underneath his eyes. He was showing off his three-pronged kunai to an invisible crowd. *Remember the Red Valley of Jonquils Blooming! This is how Konoha wins! One noble battle at a time!*

(Bird drew that. I wonder if he believes what he writes.)

The doorknob shifted; Sakura straightened as the door opened, not too fast, not too slow, and froze. "You're not Yamanaka Santa," she stated.

Danzo-sama walked in wearing the exact same clothes and holding the exact same cane as last time when she met him in the basement of the Archives. "I'm afraid Yamanaka Santa was called elsewhere. I will be overseeing this one." He sat down on the opposite chair facing her, "It is nice to see you again, Sakura-chan. It has been a while."

Cha! Not long enough. She nodded slowly, placing her book to the side. His eyes flickered to the cover and his mouth tightened in disapproval.

"I am familiar with the author," he said in a tone too casual, "Do you like the book?"

“It’s OK,” she hedged, pressing her index fingers together.

“The author writes about other distasteful topics,” his single eye narrowed, “I’ve noticed a pattern of characters that he tends to portray. But enough of that – let’s see how much you remember. Tell me, Sakura-chan,” he tapped his cane on the floor, “What are the Shinobi Rules?”

She was taken aback by the abrupt change in topic. *Shinobi Rules? I haven’t heard about the Shinobi Rules since the Academy!* “Uhh. Umm,” she stammered, quailing under his unimpressed stare, “A shinobi must always put the mission first.”

“That is rule number four.”

“And… and a shinobi must never show their tears.”

“That is rule number twenty-five.” He waited for more, but she had none. Clanless Bekko-sensei had spent exactly fifteen minutes listing out the rules before moving on to the difference between treating animal bite wounds and human bite wounds. “Alright,” Danzo-sama gave a long sigh. “Tell me, Sakura-chan, what is the goal of learning the Shinobi Rules? What type of shinobi are we trying to mold?”

He’s fishing for an answer. “A good shinobi?” He smacked her shins with his cane. *Ow…*

“An emotionless shinobi,” he corrected, “the mantra was designed to kill emotions because emotions leads one to hate and hate leads one to conflict and war. Do you know the history of the Third Shinobi War? Do you know how it started? I’m sure the Academy taught you the story of Hatake Sakumo, the man who decided to follow his heart and his teammates instead of the mission. War Starter Sakumo.”

He’s not making sense again. No one is feeling anything. We’re all getting stronger. But we’re still fighting. And maybe if people started caring, the mistakes wouldn’t be happening.

Shouldn’t.

Wouldn’t.

“To prevent incidences like Hatake Sakumo, we must not show any weakness. We must get stronger so that the choice would never be offered. We must get stronger, so we do not have to compromise with the rest of the world. We must get stronger so to bring about peace.” He nodded at the book, “Now tell me. Does your character follow the Shinobi Rules?”

Naruto following the Shinobi Rules was like Kiba following Hyuuga manners. “No, Danzo-sama.”

“Correct. Do you understand, Sakura-chan?” *I don’t understand*. She nodded. “Next lesson. Does Uchiha Itachi follow the Shinobi Rules?”

He’s fishing for another answer. “Yes?” She got hit again. “No??” She corrected with a hint of incredulity.

“Your sensei finished your last mission prematurely. We had asked Team 14 to remain until the size of our poisoned victims plateaued for at least two days to determine maximum effect.” He leaned forward. “Unfortunately, Uchiha Itachi had cut the mission short after learning about the unlucky few caught in the friendly fire, I’m sure you could recall.” Actually, Sakura could not recall. Her memories had faded to black after successfully identifying papa in the river with his comrades. (Black eyes that should be blue…) *I kind of remember a lot of screaming afterwards. …That was probably me.* “He accepted that unacceptable risk – a shinobi must always put the mission first. He did not and disrupted the precarious balance of winning and losing Konoha has painstakingly calculated. He was not strong enough. The scale tips with our every choice. You cannot be selfish.”

("---very alert. When danger threatened him he never got hurt. He knew just what to do," Ino had sang to Sakura when asked what Iruka-sensei taught the class of clan heirs, clapping along to the syllables, "He'd duck and cover. Duck and cover---")

(This is how Konoha wins! One noble battle at a time!)

“We were winning the war.”

No, we were not.

She stared at him blankly, unheeding of the air that grew itchier and colder and colder, wondering how long it was before her breaths came out as puffs of steam. He knew that she disagreed with him and his everything. He can’t kill her here. Too risky. For one, she can fight back – she doesn’t need weapons; she has chakra scalpels. *But Danzo-sama is probably a good fighter. All old ninjas are good fighters. And that male nurse outside is one of Danzo-sama’s people so it'll be two against one... But Ino’s dad is in the lobby and he’s waiting for her...* Finally, just as she was about to start scratching her arms, Danzo-sama heaved a great sigh, sagging back into his old age. “You are still not mature enough.” He slowly stood, “It is a shame. We will keep waiting.”

With you around, I’m going to make sure that I’ll never mature. Sakura bowed from her sitting position.

“Till next time, Sakura-chan.” And then, he burst into a cloud of smoke.

Kage bunshin?

Sakura wiped her sweaty palms onto her tunic. *Gross.* She took *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja* in hand, exited the room. The male nurse was gone. She waited by the door with a lost expression until a new nurse from another hallway strolled by and took pity, guiding her back to the lobby. *At least Danzo-sama didn’t talk about mama. I would’ve bitten him on his bandaged arm if he tried, Shannaro! Maybe he would’ve sent me to prison too.*

It’s a good thing sensei isn’t going to prison…

I should buy sensei some dango. He likes dango – she thought as she was nudged back into the whiteness: white ceilings, white walls, white doors, white seats, blue skies, *black eyes*…

Ino's dad waited at the same seat, setting his magazine aside when she approached. "How was it?"

Sakura shook her head, "You lost," she told him, "Again."

Mission 1907D11D: Collect and publicly burn all banned literature, articles, manuals, etc from sectors 4 through 8. Newly updated censored reading list is attached.

"Why does it have to be public?" Tenten groused, "We could've easily taken the wagons to the smithy and dumped the papers there instead of making a big mess in the town square."

Sakura shrugged as she raked the pile into a neater, steeper pyramid, "Dunno. They want people to see, I guess." A group of grown-ups walked by, cooing at *how cute they are, just look at them in their small ninja vests, cleaning up the streets like little adults! Why can't my kids be responsible like that?* Tenten stiffened. Sakura changed the subject, "How's working at the blacksmith?"

Tenten immediately brightened, "Oh, it's wonderful," she gushed, hugging her broom to her chest. "Not only can I repurpose my old weapons, but I can make new ones! I'm being shown around the forge and the guild told me that I can work alone without supervision as soon as I log in another forty hours. You know how genins like me, orphans with no strong village ties, always get the rusty knives?" She asked matter-of-fact. Sakura hesitantly nodded. "Well, no more! Tenten is on the path to quality!" With stars in her eyes, she gave a dramatic 'V' for victory pose – Sakura could imagine the waves crashing behind her. "How's your therapy thing going? Did Yamanaka-san finally get you to meet your Yamanaka doctor?"

Sakura nodded, not in the mood to elaborate. Earlier this morning, Santa-san, her therapist, had informed Sakura and Ino's dad that she had developed a *manifestation of her hidden emotions separated from her main front, strong enough to maintain a presence in her mindscape.* Ino's dad had to double check and confirmed that yeah, Sakura's voice in her head was not just some child's fancy. Santa-san and Ino's dad had firmly rejected Sakura's suggestions to name the voice *Cha-cha* or *Shannaro-chan.* After much debate and lack of creativity, that presence was officially called *Inner Sakura.*

Great. I'm crazy. …We're crazy.

"You're not crazy," Ino had scoffed after listening to Sakura's worries through her ugly crying. "You're super awesome." They had been lying on Ino's bed, watching the moon rise above the wispy clouds. Ino leaned close, "It's like a kekkei genkai, right? I think it is. And with it, Sakura-chan is Sakura-chan." She held up a tissue to Sakura's face, "Now blow before you drip all over my covers." Sakura had then purposely wiped her nose onto Ino's purple sheets.

"It is an advantage, no doubt. She probably has some resistance to Yamanaka mind techniques and genjutus but we won't be sure unless she is officially tested. I would not recommend that avenue given the… recent political climate." Santa-san had warned Ino's dad in a private family room of the clinic. "Best to keep this under wraps less she disappears under the guise of a long-term mission."

Ino's dad had rubbed his eyes and sighed heavily, "Great. Fuck." He had then turned towards Sakura, "Don't repeat that word." She nodded rapidly. He sank into the chair next to Santa-san, "We'll continue the appointments in the usual manner per protocol. Too many people are reading your progress notes and it'll be suspicious if you suddenly stop. Not to mention she desperately needs cognitive processing and most likely prolonged exposure therapy and a nutrition assessment. Bring me a copy of her… unique findings and burn the originals. Those will be kept in my personal office. Secrecy is of the utmost importance. Not any nurse. Not the hospital head. Not even the Hokage is to know. Understand?"

"Of course."

Tenten clucked her tongue when Sakura whined in distress, "that bad, eh?" She squeezed Sakura in a one-armed hug, "Tell you what, I'll show you and Kiba around the forges when we're done here! Some have these double-acting piston bellows that get big and small. Kind of like… like… it's breathing. Like lungs expanding. It's so cool. You must see!"

That does sound cool. "As long as I leave before curfew."

Tenten wrinkled her nose. "Oh yeah, that new law. No problem! We're almost done here. We just need to…" Kiba trotted over to join them, sulking. "Why do you have a raincloud over your head?"

He shoved his hands into his pockets, "Ma had to help me get Hana-nee's fun books from her closet and Hana-nee put up a nasty fight." He pointed at his scratched chin, "She's not talking to either of us now. Whatever." He rubbed Akamaru's ears, "Let's just get this over with." He turned to Sakura with a strange expression, "Hey, did you know that *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja* was on the list?"

Sakura shrugged.

Kiba scratched he side of his nose, "I mean," he said casually, "We didn't see anything when we searched your room. I guess it's fine." Akamaru whined and ducked his head back under Kiba's jacket.

Because I sealed the book in a scroll and hide the scroll in a hollowed-out academy textbook on botany and poisons and placed the textbook in a hole behind the loose boards in the wall behind my poster of the Yellow Flash.

"You gotta be careful," Kiba warned – which was funny, having Kiba warning Sakura about being careful. On the other side of the pile, sensei made hand seals: tiger, snake, ram, monkey, boar, horse, tiger – and spat out a mouthful of fire. The gathering crowd of strangers stared in fascination as their faces glowed orange and yellow – something about flames and burning captured their minds. "I won't tell. Tenten won't tell. Sensei won't tell. But, ma told Hana-nee that she could go to prison if she got caught. So that means that you could too." *Like mama.*

Team 14 all took a step back away from the blazing heat. There were many public burnings around the village right now – but this one, right here in the town square proper between Sector 6 and 7, across the street from Sakura's house, was the most important one because it

was targeted at Sakura and her favorite book. As she waved black ashes away from her face, she thought of funeral pyres and Danzo-sama and roots that should be burned. “Yeah. I know.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mission 1911A55A: Hold the northern border of Hidden Waterfall at grid coordinates [REDACTED] with Teams 8, 12, 14, 15A, 23A, 25, 28, 32, 55, 56, 78, 82A and Sections 3-17. Rotation scheduled to last for four months barring emergencies.

Her ears were still ringing from all the cracks and booms from Iwa's Explosion Corps, tags, and the red fiery power of the Kyuubi. The earth trembled and distant rumbles grew closer and closer as the sun rose until she and Kiba were constantly showered with dirt and small stones in their trench. Maybe Tenten was having a better time. She joined long support division four while Sakura and Kiba stuck together in the melee division two. Every morning, they said their goodbyes with caffeine buzzing through their blood and burning behind their eyeballs and every night, so far, they reunited by the soup pot, waiting in line for their bowls to be filled, staggering like those ninja drunkards that exited the loudest bars of Konoha.

"Like sea legs," Ami commented. She was a fellow field genin from Team 12 who was missing an ear and three fingers, "But like, ground legs. Because the ground is moving."

"Bekko-sensei said that Iwa ninjas usually generate their attacks through their hands and that you should attack the palm to hurt them. Sometimes, if you're good enough, you can trap the explosions under the skin and blast their hands off," Sakura wondered out loud as they inched forward towards the tantalizing smell of food. "I wonder why we're not winning here. He made it sound so easy."

"It's because they're all hiding behind Fu. The cowards," Ami scoffed, widening her eyes as if telling a ghost story. Her face was an Academy textbook perfect picture of 'shell shock.' Clanless Bekko-sensei had advised the class to allow specialists handle such delicate cases. *After all, worsening of neuroses can result in permanent future unemployment.* "Iwa monsters."

Tenten blinked, "Who is Fu?"

"Who is Fu, you say?" Ami cackled, "Fu is going to eat you." Her pupils were so big they seemed to eat up the surrounding white of her eyes. Then, as she turned around, her expression smoothed back to normal; she thanked the server for the meal and left for campfire 2 without any further explanation. Team 14 stared at her retreating back in bewilderment until the cook cleared his throat.

"That was weird," Kiba announced into the silence, digging his pinky into an ear.

After Team 14 got their meals: beef marrow and turnip soup, leftover wild pig from yesterday, sautéed dandelions with fireweed, and extra standard ration bars if diners were still hungry, of which they often were, Kiba had to go see the designated medic for his ruptured

eardrums who exclaimed, “Again? That’s the fourth time this week!” Sakura and Tenten lingered awkwardly in front of the tent opening, wondering if they should wait or start without him. Tenten’s stomach grumbled.

In the end, the decision was taken out of their hands when sensei, whom they haven’t seen in weeks after the initial assignments, found them standing there and sent them off to campfire 25 which caused both girls to loudly protest. Campfire 25 was for the high ranked ninjas. Campfire 25 belonged to ex-ANBU and bingo book people that had kill or flee on sight orders, not Sakura or Tenten who should be heading to campfire 2 with Ami. But sensei was oddly insistent.

Outlines of people gathered together in a comradery and close bonds sort of way. Upon closer inspection, after giving her vision some time to adjust, among the strangers, Sakura could recognize the senbon man from the Kumo Crush, Hatake-san, Uzumaki-san, and… She brightened, “Shisui-sensei! You’re still alive!” She cheered.

Shisui-sensei perked up with the mention of his name and leaned backwards to peer around his neighbor’s shoulder, “Sakura-chan!” He flailed excitedly as he jumped to his feet, “I just got back from behind enemy lines last night! Itachi-kun wanted it to be a surprise! You’ve grown so much! And you, too, Tenten-chan!” He gathered them in his arms and squeezed tight enough to leave them breathless. New white scars like lightning clustered his skin on his palms and where his neck met his collarbone. “Where’s Kiba-kun? Is he still with the medic? Inuzuka ears are hell against the Explosion Corps. Oh. Oh! Kiba-kun! Over here! And Akamaru-kun! How is my favorite dog in all of Konoha?”

“Shut up. We’re doing better than you, you loser!” Kiba wailed, trying not to tear up as he was brought into the fold.

“Still cute as ever, all of you.” Shisui-sensei pulled away to inspect them, nodding once to himself before waving at the larger group that waited for them to collect themselves. “Welcome to campfire 25! No strangers! We’re all close! We’re all friends! Meet my friends!” Team 14 sat down on a log, staring at familiar and unfamiliar faces with wary eyes. Sensei bracketed their left and Shisui-sensei their right. “It feels weird having friends twice your age,” Shisui-sensei whispered loudly, “or thrice you age! Or four-”

“Stop while you’re ahead there, kid,” Uzumaki-san dug her fist into Shisui-sensei’s head. As Shisui-sensei whined in pain, Uzumaki-san wiped imaginary dust from her mesh sleeves, “Introductions are in order! Let’s go! You can use our first names. Permission granted! No need for formality here ya know. Itachi-kun was telling us yesterday how you all still call him Uchiha-sensei, breaking his heart every time.” She placed a hand over her heart, “I am Uzumaki Kushina and-”

“Can I have your autograph?” Tenten blurted out, holding up a pen and unsealing her life-sized poster of the woman in question, “I-I’m sorry for interrupting you!” Kiba and Sakura sighed as Tenten bowed deeply face first into the cloud of post-unsealing smoke, “But it would mean a lot to me if I could get your signature! This timing is terrible… but… but… I couldn’t find you during the Kumo Crush or in Konoha and no one would answer my questions about where you were-”

"…Eh? Ehh?? Ehh??!"

"Please? I look up to you because you're the inspiration for all girls going into the ninja career." All the grown-ups stared in stunned silence at the elegant strokes of red ink blending woman with fox and the bolded kanji: *Uzumaki Kushina. Our Heroine from our Famed Allied Clan.* "All my friends at the orphanage are your biggest fans and if I could tell Kin-chan or even Sai-kun that I met you and that you support---!"

"Well, that derailed quickly," the senbon man muttered as Kushina-san bemusedly began scrawling out a motivational message -*DO YOUR BEST*-, her name, and a stick figure making a victory sign. "Right." He huffed, "I'm Shiranui Genma and this here is Hatake Kakashi. I think you are familiar with both of us. That is Uzuki Yuugao, Uchiha Inabi, and Uchiha Naori." Each gave a nod when prompted. "Come closer. We're very informal. Don't be scared. You're Team 14, aren't you? Youngest of… well, a lot of border skirmishes. From all the stories I've heard, apparently you've seen things get as bad as we have."

"Shush. Don't talk about things like that. Can you be any less considerate?" Shisui-sensei complained. Genma-san raised an eyebrow in challenge. The conversation descended into insults from there.

As grown-ups talked above her head, Sakura stirred her spoon in the soup in small circles, watching its contents float and sink out of her view, finally trading it with Tenten for the remains of her pork. Eventually, Tenten yawned and fell asleep on her shoulder as Kiba slowly nodded off by the fire with Akamaru in his lap. Sensei… Itachi-sensei, later helped her carry her teammates back to their tent.

The next morning, she checked her stock of caffeine pills ("No more than three pills in three hours or the shakes are going to be the least of your worries!" warned the quartermaster at the distribution center) and dragged herself to the operations tent, still yawning, where a Nara (one of Shikamaru-kun's many, many uncles) debriefed melee division two, asking everyone to stick close to their trenches and not advance for *we've received reports from our spies that Fu and her cohorts are preparing for a large scale offensive this afternoon. We lost half of this division last time to her damnable scale powder technique so again, reminder to everyone to not look at*--- She glanced around at the crowd, looking for a slip of purple hair, "Where's Ami?"

Kiba shrugged, "Kamano-san mentioned that she didn't report back to her tent after meals. He thought that she was pulled behind the contested territories but couldn't find the paperwork for it. I thought she ran away." He handed her a copy of the newly updated map, "Does it matter?"

"It felt nice to meet someone as young as us, even if she was a little bit…" *crazy.* "Lonely."

The general atmosphere of the division was more uplifting than yesterday due to the morning arrival of messenger hawks bringing well wishes, love letters, familial updates, and small care packages courtesy of the Academy. Sakura tried to imagine Ino's care package: pressed lavender, a shaving kit, fresh socks, and her mom's famous red bean mochi. Whoever made Sakura's care package forgot to sign their own name, providing eight packs of instant cup

ramen (miso flavored) and a note that read: *I am thinking of you! And I hope, as soon as you learn this, that you will be awesome! Dattebayo!*

"Check this out," Kiba waved a newspaper as they poured chakra into the trench walls to strengthen them and reorganized their storage scrolls. "Hana-nee sent me yesterday's newspaper." They poured over the headlines that read: *The Yellow Flash Does the Impossible Again!* "He was invited personally to Amekagure by Hanzo and the Akatsuki for peace talks and somehow came back out alive!"

"What?" Sakura grabbed the newspaper and say an ink drawing of an imagined scene where the Yellow Flash, Hanzo of the Salamander, and the cloaked and faceless Akatsuki leader sat around a table in dim light in deep discussion about the state of the continent. *Bird drew this. But, Danzo-sama never would have let him draw this to show all of Konoha!* "Is that it? That's all?"

"Nobody knows what they said," Kiba whispered as he waved a hand in front of his face to ward off biting insects. An Uchiha duo a couple meters west of their position combined the water dragon bullet technique with lightning release and sent their attack arcing through the trees. Out of sight, someone (an enemy, hopefully) screamed in pain. "Apparently they're sort of friends now???"

Sakura blinked, "But the Yellow Flash must have reported to the Hokage! So at least they know!"

"Ma and Hana-nee didn't think so. She said that the Hokage and the elders were pretty upset when he blew them off – but she sounded happy about it." They ducked as the air grew hot enough to cause the trees to bend, squinting as a bright flash blinked three times in succession. The swarm of bugs that had been annoying them for the past two hours retreated and rose into the clouds, thick enough to block out the sun. Sakura and Kiba slowly peaked over the edge, palming their kunai. They already had to kill one Taki ninja each that tried to ambush them with a genjutsu and a hail of water shurikens and neither wanted to be caught unaware with a possible second wave.

But they saw no ninjas. Instead, on the other side of the small man-made lake, standing behind a barrier of felled trees, was a gigantic armored insect monster, weaving a web of chakra strings with its six legs. Behind its stomach that was more snake than bug was a fan of seven tails, or wings… or both. It's six legs froze as a call of challenge echoed from West Willow Valley. Slowly, the monster turned towards the Kyuubi's cry and slowly slithered away, the cloud of whining insects following in its wake.

Akamaru whined. "What is that?" Kiba's voice was like a hot knife that cut through the hush that fell over the Konoha side. Other ninjas in their trench hissed at him for being loud.

"I think that's Fu."

There were no further engagements. Still, waiting for action could be as bad as being in action. The arrival of the night team to relieve Sakura and Kiba from their position was like releasing tension from a taut trap wire. As they stood in line for the hot meals and debated

skipping eating altogether, Itachi-sensei swooped down, picked them up, and carried them over to campfire 25 where the crowd watched Yuugao-san butcher a deer.

“Are you sure we can be here?” Sakura asked nervously, “I thought yesterday was, you know, Shisui-sensei’s first day greeting polite stuff. We’re not allowed to come here *every* night.” Campfire 25 was an exclusive club and all the people fighting the Taki Border skirmishes knew it. Kiba and Sakura were already gathering strange looks from their fellow melee division two members.

Itachi-sensei blinked in consternation, “You will always be welcomed here. Tenten-chan already secured kenjutsu lessons with Yuugao-san while waiting for you two.”

Yeah but Tenten is a bit shameless like that…

Tenten was staring at Yuugao-san’s knife with starry eyes as Yuugao-san cut the deer into manageable pieces which were then taken to Genma-san who flavored, skewered, and cooked the meat like bushfire yakitori. The sounds of crackling and the smells of burnt ends had Sakura wiping away her own drool with her sleeve. “Look how sharp the edge is,” Tenten sighed like a Sasuke fangirl, “Yuugao-san barely needed to exert any pressure to separate the muscle groups. Her wrist control is so precise she barely lost any meat while taking off the silver skin.”

“You flatter me,” Yuugao-san demurred, “There are however many talented sword fighters still in the village. My boyfriend being one of them.”

Tenten shook her head as she accepted a plate of venison with tare sauce and wild asparagus, “but it’s really hard to get lessons as an orphan without connections. Itachi-sensei tried but Uchihas specialize more in ninjutsu than kenjutsu. I looked everywhere! And then, finally! Finally, Orochimaru-sama took pity on me and set me up as an apprentice with the blacksmith guild and told me to learn my weapons before I try anything fancy.”

Genma-san spat out his senbon. Yuugao-san’s grip on her knife spasmed. Kushina-san’s mouth dropped open. Everyone else gaped with various levels of disbelief. “Oh? He was the reason that you got your own forge?” Kiba asked through a mouthful of food. “When was this?”

“Remember when he visited the hospital after the Akai Kori River incident? His Bingo Book entry said that he fights with the Kusanagi no Tsurugi. I thought: Why not him? Everyone else already said no. So, I followed him.” *Stalked him* – Inner Sakura corrected. “I followed him all the way back to his lab and begged,” *Shameless* – Inner Sakura added. “until he introduced me to the smithy, the one by that store that sells the juicy tangerines all year long. He still checks up on my progress when I’m there.”

“Wait,” Shisui-sensei held up his chopsticks, “You had enough guts to ask the Snake Sannin for help?”

Sakura was quick to defend Tenten’s choices. “Orochimaru-sama is a nice guy,” she declared, continuing even as Kakashi-san muttered to Naori-san in disbelief – *nice guy* – “He’s stopped

papa from dying. And when he apologized, he actually meant it." *Unlike the elders who came to visit.* "Mama likes him."

"You don't think he's scary at all? My son thinks he's absolutely terrifying. He can summon giant snakes and kind of looks like one too ya know?" Kushina-san pressed. As one, Team 14 turned and looked at Kushina-san like she said something incredibly stupid. "What?"

"Um… You turn into a giant demon fox, Kushina-san," Sakura delicately pointed out.

Genma-san burst into laughter, that sort of leaning back and slapping his knee laughing, as Kushina-san's mouth dropped open for the second time that night. "You little brats," she sputtered, "What disrespect. Who's the one who drew Lucky Seven Fu away from the center towards West Willow Valley for a one on one battle?" Genma-san kept laughing. She crossed her arms, shrugging off Kakashi-san's consoling pat on her shoulder. "Hmph! Fine, fine. You win. I guess I should apologize the next time I see him…"

The next few days grew monotonous – battle, rest, battle, rest, battle, rest, on and on and on. At the operations tent, Nara-san looked more and more harried and in an increasingly desperate need of a shave. With each passing night, new ninjas replaced old ninjas at different campfires, whether due to being killed in battle or rotated back to the village, no one truly knew, and Sakura was too scared to ask. Uchiha Inabi disappeared on a night when campfire 25 ate potato soup with ginseng – a blank space on Uchiha Naori's right until Naori-san, with a stoic expression, shifted to fill the position of two people. The next night, Naori-san was gone too. Four nights after, two new Uchihas sat in their place at campfire 25 and no one commented on the change.

Supplies shrunk down to worrisome levels. Meals became more rations than actual food. Everyone was advised to suck the marrow from bones for 'nutrition optimization.' Local wildlife began to dry up in the surrounding area of the base. Shisui-sensei suggested trying to eat the insects *like they do in Iwa. I heard that it's a thing – crunchy and tasteless. No, seriously!* But got smacked in the head for that idea because *the insects are from Fu. They're formed with bijuu chakra – you really want to eat that, idiot? It'll burn you from the inside out!*

Just like her rotation with Team Yuuto by the civilian village of Singing Reeds against Kiri and Ame and again in the aftermath of the Kumo Crush, the distribution of resources grew startlingly familiar.

Clan first. Clanless later.

Campfire 25 tried to help by sneaking their shares onto Sakura and Tenten's plate. "Mahh," Kakashi-san said with an eye-smile as he waved a spoonful of brown mush in front of her face, "You're so tiny, Sakura-chan. You should eat more. Your sensei is fretting."

(Tenten had gone to visit a fellow friend from the orphanage at the sick tents and reemerged with sunken eyes. "Not enough bandages to go around," She had muttered, hugging Akamaru for comfort, "Not enough medicine. It smelled like the Akai Kori River in there.")

Sakura pressed her lips together even as her stomach groaned. "I'm not hungry."

It rained overnight. The next morning, instead of the alarm bell, Team 14 woke up to a plague of locusts chewing on all the vegetation: grass, bushes, leaves. In the trenches, mosquitos rose up from the puddles and bit their shins, red welts upon red welts. Then horse flies, then gnats, then hornets. Later that day, Nara-san established a new initiative for all doton users to drain the swamp basin. Posters were plastered on tree trunks: *Change your socks. Keep your feet dry! Only you can prevent trench foot!* And: *Don't scratch or else you'll risk infection!*

One night, amid the living hell, Nara-san and all his fellow Nara clans people dragged Kushina-san away in the middle of dinner (arrowroot soup and pine needle tea and a single ration bar) towards the operations tent. "This has gone on long enough." He had declared with gritted teeth, "I don't care what the Council says. We need to plan a final decisive attack against Fu."

Sakura itched all over, scratch marks riddling her arms and legs, occasionally a thin line of red with a drop of blood peeking through where her nails broke the skin. She wondered what the final straw would be to cause her to snap. *Everything is the straw.* The lack of baths. A thin layer of stinky blood-dirt coating her like an undershirt. The clouds of pests and bugs that no amount of slapping or swatting can rid. The bijuu chakra that hung in the air, growing thicker and thicker as Kushina-san and Fu fought and fought and fought to standstills, tinting everyone's vision with orange-red. People got nightmares. The tents made it easy to figure out which teams were cracking. One of the chunins was rounding between the campfires, offering to trade three drops of camphor and menthol for a cigarette.

"At this point, I don't even care if we lose as long as we get the hell out of here," one of the new Uchiha arrivals muttered as he stared into the campfire, rubbing his dirty face with his dirtier glove. "Fuck. I can't even imagine staying here as long as you guys have."

"That counts as sedition, Yakumi-san," Yuugao-san said archly, "Careful when and where you speak."

Shisui-sensei hurriedly inserted himself between the two to avoid conflict, "Well, I found that if you keep your mind on the people that you are fighting for, this *jigoku* becomes that much bearable," he opened his arms as if encompassing the entire base.

"Easy for some of you to say. Not all of us use our love of little brothers as a focal meditation point," Yakumi-san side-eyed Itachi-sensei.

"Oi. Sasuke-kun is super cute," Shisui-sensei pointed dramatically at Yakumi-san, who grunted but didn't disagree. "Sasuke-kun should be everyone's anchor since he's so innocent and adorable and the only Uchiha who isn't fighting… unlike us out here… yeah…" He trailed off awkwardly.

"I don't think it's healthy to put an entire clan's mental health on a kid's shoulder," Kakashi-san helpfully piped up from behind his orange book.

"Says the person with all the childhood traumas in the world," Genma-san replied. "I can't imagine you dealing with kids. You as a sensei? Perish the thought."

"I did well with Yuugao-chan!"

“Face it. She already had all the basics down before she met you,” Genma-san shook his head, “I bet you’re the type of jounin-sensei that encourages rivalry between teammates and then picks favorites. You seem like the type. Unlike Itachi-kun here who is painfully fair.”

“That’s a good thing!” Shisui-sensei exclaimed. “I think it’s a good thing! You’re allowed to have favorites as long as it doesn’t impact how you treat others and your method of teaching! Team 14 knew that I liked Sakura-chan the best but she has to run laps like all the others and no one was scared to ask me for questions and extra help. My own jounin sensei was a branch Senju and he hated Uchihas but even he helped me perfect my shunshin technique when I was just a baby genin.” Then he hesitated. “Hey, cousin. Do you actually *have* a favorite from Team 14?” All the occupants of campfire 25 held their breath as Itachi-sensei surveyed his charges with a considering air. Then, he slowly reached over and ruffled Kiba’s hair. Akamaru licked and nuzzled his hand. The group exploded in surprise.

“Kiba-kun?” Shisui-sensei mused. “Interesting.”

“The Inuzuka? Really?” Kakashi-san asked, snapping his book shut. Genma-san grumpily handed a packet of ryo over to Yuugao-san’s waiting hand.

“That’s OK,” Sakura said magnanimously, “Kiba needs all the help he can get.”

“Hey!”

“It makes sense,” Yuugao-san said with a wise air about her as she counted her winnings. “They’re on the opposite spectrums in terms of personalities. Itachi-kun had always tried to be more boisterous and socially open, which practically defines the traits of the Inuzuka clan.”

“Hey, Itachi-sensei,” Tenten whispered, “We’re not mad. Kiba’s our favorite too.”

“Wh-what is that supposed to mean?! Are you making fun of me?!”

At that moment, as Kiba and Tenten were about to descend into an all-out brawl, Kushina-san rejoined the group, sweeping in like a sudden whirlwind of energy, aggressively cheerful, canines just this side of too long to be human. The temperature of the air suddenly rose by a few degrees. Kiba and Tenten disengaged and edged back to their original spots on opposite sides of Itachi-sensei.

“Side effect of Kurama’s assistance ya know,” she answered the unasked question, grin impossibly wide, “Now,” she clapped her clawed hands and cleared her throat, “can I have all the kids ages seven and under go to bed? I need to talk shop with my team. Classified stuff.” Yuugao-san straightened with a hand placed on her sword hilt. Kakashi-san blinked twice. Genma-san’s senbon stopped twirling.

Team 14 exchanged a knowing look. “About Fu.” Tenten stated without asking.

“Yep.” Kushina-san winked, popping her consonants, “Fu. I need to make the final adjustments to the tomorrow assault with the others before submitting to Nara-san. Nara-san will then relate to you your role in all this in the morning. It’s going to be all about wind

directions and coordinates and trajectories and everything too advanced for your age. Don't want to make your precious little heads hurt."

Team 14 looked towards Itachi-sensei who nodded solemnly once.

Kushina-san's smile grew kinder, "Go to sleep. Tomorrow is going to be OK."

…Tomorrow was only sort of OK.

For one, everyone, literally everyone on the Taki Border, saw Shisui-sensei get blasted in the face by a member of Iwa's Explosion Corps in the canopy and get carted off on a stretcher with his hair still smoking. "Look on the bright side. If he lives," Kiba whispered, "He can come back to Konoha with us." There was barely anytime to scream and worry. Nara-san had ordered Tenten and the rest of long support division four to the branches and press forward with suppressing fire as all melee divisions advanced to enemy lines where Fu's chakra strings anchored to the ground, taking roost in open, vulnerable positions that made them easily picked off by Taki ninjas.

Kushina-san, glowing in red bijuu chakra, roared and disintegrated all the cocoons that sheltered the Iwa ninjas, creating a burnt path for regular Konoha ground troops to charge. Fu the giant insect monster wrestled with Kushina-san the giant demon fox, creating earthquakes and leveling mountains. The West Willow Valley was pocked with craters as countless bijuu balls slammed into the landscape. Boulders the size of houses flew from the resulting shockwaves. This sort of unreal power was the only reason why Nara-san insisted on passing around updated topography maps at the beginning of every day.

Iwa ninjas, unlike Konoha ninjas, preferred having mesh rather than bandages covering their ankles, which made Sakura's job easier as she disabled their Achilles tendons with her newly mastered chakra scalpels, leaving them behind clutching their legs in pain and confusion before being killed by other Konoha nins. "Wait up. Kiba! Slow down!" She yelled as Kiba's fang rotating fang disappeared behind the tree line. She struggled to catch up, wheezing with her lack of stamina. "Kiba! There you… Tenten!"

Tenten yanked Sakura down towards the hollow at the base of the tree and pressed a finger to her lips. Kiba rested his chin on Tenten's shoulder and gave a fanged grin. They were scrapped, bruised, and bleeding – but they were OK. Tenten pointed upward towards the sky. *Look.*

In the partial shelter of thick roots, Team 14 craned their necks back and watched as a giant demon fox punch a giant insect monster in the face, stabbing the insect in the stomach with nine of nine tails in rapid fire, following up the combo with a bijuu ball to the neck. Fu screeched in pain, loud enough to cause all birds in the vicinity to flee from the trees, her monstrous form disappearing behind a cloud of smoke. The wind blew the smoke away, revealing an unconscious and smoking tanned teenage girl with green hair who momentarily floated weightless in the air – then immediately whisked off by two Taki ninjas, one grabbing each arm, and out of sight.

Kushina-san gave chase. Stomp. Stomp. Stomp. Team 14's shelter shuddered with every shaking step.

“Whoa,” Kiba remarked in a hushed voice. “You’re right, Sakura. She is a super ninja.”

Team 14 limped back to the base amid chattering Konoha ninjas in the highest spirits anyone had seen in a long, long time. Rumors jumped from gossiper to gossiper uncontrolled. Some declared that this was the end of the war – *everyone can return home!* Demolition team five claimed that the higher ups ordered all armies on the Taki Border to give chase and press the momentum onward but that was an unpopular hypothesis met with boos and hisses. Fu might be dead or alive – nobody cared as long as she was gone. A petition was passed around: pleading for the Council to rotate everyone who experienced this fateful day back to Konoha, even those who hadn’t finished their ten-month stint, as a reward.

“You should’ve seen how bad it gets when we actually lose ground,” Shisui-sensei remarked brightly in the shade of the medical tent, trying to peak under his eye mask even as the medic kept smacking his fingers. “When I was at the north border, where we lost, everyone was convinced that Ame was going to send salamander summons to eat all of us even as we were retreating. That was a bad time. This is,” he sighed happily, enjoying the cool press of medical chakra on his scalp, “not so bad.”

“His Sharingan is damaged,” the medic had informed Kushina-san with a grave tone, “we’ll need to send him back to Konoha for specialized treatment, though I don’t know what they can do without Senju Tsunade. Perhaps a Hyuuga specialist would have more ideas. Until then, he is functionally blind.”

“I’m going home next week with Team 14!” Shisui-sensei cheered at campfire 25 as dinner was being prepared. “You hear that, cousin? We’ll be in the village together for once!”

“Rub it in, why don’t you,” Uchiha Yakumi grumbled even as Yuugao-san elbowed him in the side.

“Eh?” Kushina-san exclaimed through her big bite of ramen, “So soon? Ara. I’m going to miss you brats.”

“You’re not coming with us?” Sakura asked, “But you definitely did more than four months.”

“I’m a jinchuuriki,” she flicked Sakura in the forehead, “My team and I are stationed here until the higher up’s say so. Same applies for the strategy division with Nara-san and all of his fellow Nara-sans.”

“Well now that things are getting better here. Supplies restocked including actual dried meats. Less enemies wanting my head,” Genma-san drawled, leaning back to stare at the stars, “I’m kind of happy I don’t have to go back, part of that lucky fifty percent who survived today. I heard things from Raido about the political climate back home that is a bit ---” He seesawed his hand.

Kushina-san bit her bottom lip, “Hmm, yeah. I guess it already got that bad. Mina-chan said the same. Mikoto-chan was… well, really mad and said some things not for young ears. Now I want to know the answer. I must ask.” She turned towards Sakura and grabbed her hands, “Hey, hey, Sakura-chan. What your mom said. Is that true?”

Sakura blinked. “Huh?”

“I was there when she publicly challenged the Sandaime after the Tragedy at the Akai Kori River… which was kind of cool ya know! But gutsy and a little stupid but she’s a mom so I get it. She said,” Kushina-san stopped waving her arms and frowned, “She said that you didn’t know what you were fighting for. Is that true?”

My only daughter does not even know what she is fighting for and yet she’s already lost track of her own kill count! She is six! Look me in the eye, Hiruzen, and tell me the truth! Tell me why!

“Kushina… Uzumaki-san… Taichou,” Yuugao-san shifted uncomfortably, “Are you certain that you want to ask this?”

“Let the girl speak,” Yakumi-san rolled his eyes, “None of us are going to report her. This should be the least of your worries regarding her. Have you seen that book she hides badly at her side? The one that was on the list to burn a while back? Everyone on base has seen her reading it and nobody is going to report her, and you know it. As for me, watching a walking and budding lawbreaker here – lucky for her, I had to be honorably discharged from the police force to get sent here. It’s not my job anymore.”

“You said you were going to be careful!” Kiba hissed.

“I didn’t agree to anything!” Sakura hissed back.

Shisui-sensei laughed and swung an arm around her shoulders, “I never knew you could be so sneaky, Sakura-chan! Like a true ninja. What an odd question. Wasn’t it obvious who we just fought? We just defeated Fu and pushed back her forces. Such an easy answer.” Sakura scratched at her arms. Shisui-sensei’s smile fell off his face. “OK. OK. Not an easy answer. I understand. No. Stop. You’re going to bleed.” He blindly reached for her hands but ended up gripping her wrists, staining his palms red, “Shit, you are bleeding. Hey. I’m not mad. Deep breaths. None of us are mad. You’re not in trouble.”

“Here - from Iwa and Taki,” Sakura murmured, slumping against Shisui-sensei’s side.

“Hm? What did you say?”

“Who we’re fighting. Iwa and Taki. Right?” *But not just them.* She cleared her throat and willed herself to speak louder. “And with my old team, before Team 14, I was fighting Kiri and Ame at Singing Reeds. And then Kumo during the chunin exams.” *Where all the other countries jeered whenever Konoha won. Anyone but Konoha.* “Mama was called to Hi no Kuni’s eastern shore to watch for ships from Kiri.” *Kiri kappas and Iwa monsters love eating innocent Konoha children. Defend your village!* “Papa was in Suna. I was in Suna.” *Where papa almost died in Suna.* “Is that it?” *How many was that?* “That’s the big ones and some of the smaller ones. So… We’re fighting everyone. Everyone hates us.”

Yakumi-san gave a heavy sigh. “Kid. It’s a little bit more complicated than that.”

“It’s not that complicated.” She stomped her feet in frustration, “Grown-ups make it complicated. But it’s so easy. Clanless Bekko-sensei said that Konohakagure was founded by the Senju and the Uchiha to end the Warring States Period. But there are no Senjus in Konoha and the Uchiha are dying and Konoha is at war with everyone. It’s only complicated for stupid people.”

“Kid. I get it. You’re upset. The Uchihas, and I would know as an Uchiha, have thought -”

“Have you read *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja*? That the book that they said should be burned. Have you actually read it?” Sakura asked hurriedly, pulling out said book from her pack, dog eared and water stained, and pushing it into Yakumi-san’s sad face, “*Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja* is like the unofficial official book of Team 14. Tenten read it, Kiba read it, Shisui-sensei read it, Itachi-sensei read it. I read it a lot. So. So, I know a lot of scenes by heart.*”* Every adult was facing her but she couldn’t tell what they were thinking because her vision was beginning to blur. *Maybe they all have sad faces like Ino’s dad.* She wiped her nose with her sleeve. Kiba and Tenten pressed closer. Shisui-sensei squeezed her wrists. Itachi-sensei’s chakra was like a warm blanket over her shoulders.

This is sedition. Yuugao-san didn’t interrupt her.

Sakura took a deep breath and steeled herself, gathering as much courage as she could muster. “During the Kumo Crush, I remembered this one part –”

--- "*Oh well then it is okay to annihilate a small village just to demonstrate to others one’s manpower?” blurted Naruto. Shu looked at him unwavering. “Don’t you realize what you are talking about there? Human lives are at stake! Is it really alright to kill all the people of a village?”*

“That is the reality though, Naruto. Our conception of moral and reason outside of the village has no meaning anymore. We lead a life as ninja to protect our village from humans who don’t share our ideals. Isn’t that so?”

“Yeah, sure, however the other ninjas love their villages as much as we do ours, right?” ---

“And we just keep destroying – mostly villages, even while they trusted ... at least this much! And it’s a betrayal. It's bad, you know?" She was seven years old and didn't know how to speak like the Sandaime at his rallys by the Hokage mountain. She was seven years old and couldn't list all of her hard feelings in bullet form like Santa-san or teach it to others like Clanless Bekko-sensei. "This is wrong. And I think to myself." She was just seven years old and talking without talking and while Kiba and Tenten and Itachi-sensei and Shisui-sensei nodded in understanding, all the grown-ups were looking at her like they were learning something new. "What if… What if we’re the bad guys?”

Chapter End Notes

Inspired by the Mitchell and Webb Nazi Sketch

Chapter 6

Mission 1921D35D: Clean the Naka Shrine of the Uchiha compound to listed specifications. Reward to be giving by supervisor (designation: 005348 - Uchiha Mikoto).

“We could’ve taken the Tora Retrieval mission,” Kiba started leadingly as he poured water from the Naka River over the head stones and got onto his knees to start scrubbing at the rivulets with a brush that had already lost half of its bristles, “It would’ve been more fun.”

Shisui-sensei and Itachi-sensei exchanged a glance which looked kind of cool since Shisui-sensei was still wearing his medical eye mask. “Ara, Kiba-kun. You don’t want that mission. You wouldn’t like it.”

“I’m an Inuzuka,” Kiba patted Akamaru’s head and puffed out his chest, “That mission is about chasing a cat. What’s not to like?”

“Trust me,” Shisui-sensei assured, a smile tugging on the edge of his mouth. “Trust your old sensei.”

After Team 14 picked and scraped and cursed their way through layers of packed dirt and dust and debris, when the sun had climbed to the highest point in the sky, Itachi-sensei brought Team 14 indoors where a jug of cold water and a small jar of honeyed lemons waited for them. Sakura yawned as Tenten wiped down the condensation of the jug and poured everyone a glass. “Thanks,” she mumbled as she watched Shisui-sensei grope about blindly for his chair and gingerly sit down.

He and Itachi-sensei got into a conversation about the possibility of bringing Senju-sama back into town. *She’s squeamish about blood, cousin, but the microsurgery procedure indicated for me would be behind my eye at the nerves, so she technically wouldn’t be seeing any blood while operating.* Shisui-sensei shrugged. *So convincing Senju-sama to return to Konoha would be like convincing Kakashi-sempai to talk about feelings… The Council had forbidden our clan to search for her which doesn't... ---*

Politics – Inner Sakura noted sagely, rubbing her imaginary chin.

Sakura glanced out the window lined by faded yellow curtains where Izumi-sempai wheeled around without any legs. In the end, she lost her second one due to medical complications. Despite her handicap, she successfully dodged a tiny black and blue blur that slammed into the ground where she had been a second before, sending small bits of grass flying. The blur shifted into a boy Sakura’s age with typical Uchiha features and clothing. *That’s Uchiha Sasuke. That's the spare.* She noted absentmindedly and then felt guilty for placing the label on someone who didn’t know any better. *Ino and Shisui-sensei was right. He is super cute*. *Not pretty like Itachi-sensei, but cute.*

The kitchen door at the far end of the room closed shut. Sakura blinked out of her reverie and turned, eyes widening as she saw the newcomer: the clan matriarch, Uchiha Mikoto. Mama used to be jealous of her shurikenjutsu. Just before her mission at the Akai Kori River, on a cloudy night, mama and Sakura had sat together in the Haruno living room, mama with her sewing kit mending curtains and Sakura with her dolls pretending to be a hero, and mama talked about her time at the Battle of Black Ravens Rising where Uchiha Mikoto made whirlwinds of shurikens to entrap her enemies in a technique called *Death by a Thousand Cuts. At the height of her reputation, she could take on multiple opponents at a time. Unfortunately, her close friendship with the Uzumaki jinchuuriki was making many people nervous; she got pulled off the roster indefinitely, eventually replaced by her clan members. Such a shame. Such a shame...*

These days, mama sits in the back-left corner of her prison cell and calls out over and over again. *Little Sakura-chan. Beloved daughter. Little Sakura-chan. Beloved daughter. Little Sakura-chan…*

“At least she’s saying your name now,” mama’s prison guard, Bird, who had eventually introduced himself as Sai-kun, had whispered as mama finally fell asleep. “Remember last time when you visited? Just noises. No words. She was like your father,” he bent over his collection of brushes and scrolls, offering her an ink drawing of papa with all of his tubes and wires and sensors and machines, “the one in the hospital,” he clarified, “Not your Yamanaka-dad.”

“Ino’s dad is not my dad,” she had denied, hugging her knees to her chest as she watched Sai-kun draw himself and another boy in a one-on-one battle. The other boy was swinging a short tanto, multiple motion lines blurring his arms. The drawing of Sai-kun was parrying the attack with a brush. Standing between them was a bandaged old man with a cane. She squinted, fingers brushing over the old man’s face, smearing the lines together, “Is that Danzo-sama?” Sai-kun nodded. “Is Danzo-sama your dad?”

Sai-kun had shrugged, “I don’t know.”

“Oh.” She looked at the boy attacking drawing-Sai. “Who’s that?”

He batted her hand away, “That’s my brother. I think. I have a brother.” He frowned, “I had a brother,” he corrected.

Had… “You had a brother,” she had repeated. *You killed your brother.* Sai-kun nodded, pulling out an old drawing from his pile and handing it over. He had drawn the body of his dead brother with all of its cuts and open wounds. On the right bottom corner, he had scrawled the date. Then, among the scrolls, he pulled out an old newspaper released a week later – it was the same article that Kiba got from his family during Team 14’s rotation at the Taki Border of the Yellow Flash making peace with the Ame leaders. *I drew this*. Sai-kun had seemed to say silently. *I drew things Danzo-sama didn’t want me to because I'm sad. I'm sad because Danzo-sama told me to kill my brother.* “You must really miss him.” She hedged, “Does it still hurt?”

Sai-kun hummed. *Of course, it hurts.* Inner Sakura had scoffed. *It will always hurt. I wonder if Danzo-sama punished him yet.*

“It’s OK if it still hurts. It’s supposed to.” She had rocked back and forth, her legs growing numb. On the other side of the prison bars, mama shuffled into her brown blanket and moaned as she dreamed of bad things. “And if it makes you think of things that you usually don’t think about. Or if you start feeling things that make you afraid.” Grief. Anger. Vengeance. “That's OK too. And even if your family... your family..." She swallowed the lump in her throat threatening to rise, "You have me too. Even though I think you’re annoying sometimes, I also think that you need help. You can ask me to help and I’ll try. OK?”

Sai-kun had nodded again, ducking his head back down to his inks. His hands were trembling.

Good. Because he doesn’t look like he has his own Team 14... Even though she knew that he couldn’t see, Sakura had nodded too.

The next day, Sai-kun was gone. Sakura hadn't seen him since.

Mikoto-san smiled a motherly smile like sunshine after rain and cold soba on a summer day, “I am so glad to finally be meeting my son’s team. Please, my husband would love to see you too after lunch.”

Team 14 exchanged looks, “But it’s the early morning and we’re already done?” Tenten said.

Mikoto-san’s smile sharpened, “I had arranged this mission to last the whole day and you will be rightly compensated for your hours. No one would be suspicious if Team 14 did not pick a second D-ranked chore today. Cleaning the Naka Shrine is always such hard work and little kids need to eat well to grow big and strong. I will be making a traditional cuisine and I hope that is enough to tempt you to stay.” Sakura and Tenten wavered, both without grown-ups in their lives to make quality meals. Sakura thought about burnt onions and charred garlic, of stir fry without seasoning and mushy, overcooked noodles.

Then, Mikoto-san presented a yamato nadeshiko worthy spread. Perfect little bowls of domed rice accompanied by steaming miso soup topped with green onions. Side dishes of red and yellow sashimi and pickled daikon radish. Crispy tempura arranged in a circle on the center plate. Grilled mackerel smoking in a clay pot, caught this morning from the Naka river. Tamagoyaki and tofu in kaminabe and lightly steamed vegetables. “Thank you, mother,” Itachi-sensei said as he poured everyone a small cup of oolong tea. Shisui-sensei parroted his words. Sakura opened her mouth and blushed when, instead of saying thanks, she gave a strangled whimper. Tenten audibly sighed, leaning forward and forward across the table as the smells wafted through the room.

“It’s a bribe,” Kiba declared as he pierced a tamagoyaki with his chopsticks, swallowed the tamagoyaki whole, and started reaching for a second. "Not even ma cooks this good when she wants me to do Hana-nee's chores. ...Don’t tell ma I said that." *It’s a trap* – Inner Sakura warned. *Don’t care* – replied Sakura’s stomach – *I haven’t had tempura in forever*. Tenten agreed as she helped herself to one of everything. “Itachi-sensei’s mom wants us to meet who? His dad?”

“What’s his name again?” Tenten leaned back, wiping a grain of rice off her cheek, “I forgot… Clan Head Uchiha Fugu-something? Like the fish?”

Sakura nodded vigorously, “Yeah, Clan Head Fugu-something,” and then yelped when Shisui-sensei reached over and smacked all three of their heads.

“It’s Fu-ga-ku, you rude little brats,” he corrected exasperatedly, “Glad we’re having this talk before seeing him.” Then he snatched the last tempura, reveling in their angry cries, “cousin, your mom has out done herself. She must really want the kids to stay.” Itachi-sensei grunted.

“I’m not complaining,” Kiba declared, patting his stomach. Akamaru barked in agreement.

“Yeah,” Sakura mumbled, washing her rice down with tea, “Tastes like-” *home, mama, papa. Before. What a nice and delicious trap.*

The dishes were picked clean; everyone swirled the dregs of their tea and thanked their hostess. Mikoto-san gathered their dirtied dishes, waving away offers to cleanup, “What sort of hostess would I be if my guests were assisting me in household duties? Itachi-kun. Please take our guests to the study room. Your father is waiting.”

Itachi-sensei lead them through a maze of traditional halls, wooden floors and paper screen walls. Tenten had to hold onto Shisui-sensei’s hand to guide him through the twists and turns. Beyond partially opened doors, Sakura spotted rolled tatami mats and personal touches to various rooms: posters, scrolls with drawings of shrimp and carp and mountains and clouds, dulled and sharpened kunai, opened textbooks, lamps sitting at stained desk corners. At last, Itachi-sensei stopped in front of a door that looked the same as all the other doors and just as he was about to make a fist against the frame, Shisui-sensei suddenly pulled him back and placed a finger on his mouth.

Listen.

“--- further bloodshed and the mindless loss of lives, but the old guard would not relent out of pride. Countless overtures have been made on both sides from all major ninja countries and all attempts for peace have been systematically sabotaged. There cannot be a ceasefire until our leaders -”

“Minato,” a second voice interrupted the first voice. “We have visitors waiting outside.”

“I trust that you thoroughly screen every guest that enters your grounds.” There was a pause. “Very well. We will continue this conversation at a later date.” And then, the first voice called out, “You can come in, if we’re still keeping pretenses.”

There were two men in the room. The one sitting at the desk looked like Itachi-sensei if Itachi-sensei suddenly got old and forgot how to smile. The other one leaning casually against the desk had yellow jonquil hair, sky eyes, and a friendly grown-up smile, all on a face that was plastered on Sakura’s bedroom wall. She gasped. “It has been a while since I’ve seen you, father,” Itachi-sensei’s grip on her shoulder grounded her as Inner Sakura started flailing madly around her mindscape. *Yellow Flash! That’s the Yellow Flash!* “Here is my genin team, at your behest.”

“A surprise but not unwelcomed one. I expected you and your charges to visit later in the day.” Older Itachi-sensei eyed Team 14 critically, “They do not look like much. From Kushina’s reports and the rumors in the jounin lounge, I had expected a more robust trio.” Team 14 bristled.

“Clan Head Fugu-something doesn’t sound like a robust name either.” Tenten shot back.

“Are you calling us wimpy, Fugu-something?” Kiba demanded as Akamaru barked once.

“Fu-ga-ku,” Shisui-sensei groaned from behind them, “Clan Head Uchiha Fu-ga-ku!”

“I get it! I get it!” Sakura exclaimed proudly, raising her hand, as the Uchiha clan head began to turn purple. “This is all *underneath the underneath.* It’s like that scene in *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja* where Fugu-something is like Renge and the Yellow Flash is like Naruto.” The Yellow Flash twitched. “That scene with the donabe and the saibashi where Renge had to run away from the ninety-nine samurais.” She wiggled her fingers and her teammates lit up in understanding.

“Ooooh,” Tenten whispered as she side-eyed the two adults. “You’re planning *treason,*” she sang the last word.

“That part was cool.” Kiba said approvingly, “Lots of fire jutsus.”

“What a smart bunch,” the Yellow Flash muttered, scratching his chin. “And what unfortunate timing. I’m technically not supposed to initiate contact with any of Team 14. Orders from the top, you see.”

“We won’t tell on you!” Kiba assured him. “We can keep a secret.” Then he corrected himself, “We have lots of secrets and we know which ones to tell and which ones to not tell.”

The Yellow Flash smiled, “So you agree with me?”

Sakura bit her bottom lip hard enough to draw blood. She thought of the Memorial stone with Kaito-sempai and Yuuto-sensei’s name etched at the bottom right, of Neji-sempai’s funeral that she had to watched from a distance perched on a maple tree, of Kumo and the girl who called her a monster, how dead bodies swell with rotting gas, of bijuu chakra. Tenten always had trouble sleeping without medication. Kiba could spend an hour brushing his teeth if no one stopped him.

“You have to hurry though,” Sakura warned. “They already know that we’re not happy.”

The Yellow Flash rolled his shoulders back; from second to second, he switched from dad to ninja, ninja to dad. “Timing is not going to be on our side.” From his vest pockets, he drew out a handful of loose leaflets. “These are what's causing us to hesitate; they were found on the ground a good distance away from the main square, supporting extremely radical notions and framing them as if they were of norm.”

Sai-kun’s ink drawings of dancing cranes and sparrows escaping shuriken rain, framing the Yellow Flash who held up a glowing blue ball of chakra. *The Yellow Flash Prepares to take*

the Mantle! Another portrait of the Yellow Flash with the Hokage's triangle hat. *Our Next Generation Steps Up to the Challenge!* Talking with civilians: merchants, farmers, industry, administration – all staring up at him like they see God. *Where would you place your trust?* On and on – noble deeds and noble tasks, similar enough to the other sanctioned posters for everyday people to read without suspicion.

"Sai," Tenten stated with a sigh, as if he was an errant little brother who constantly runs away from home.

"Who's Sai?" Kiba asked.

"From the Orphanage," Tenten pulled on her bangs, "he was taken by the Bandaged Man a few months ago. He was the last one left that the Bandaged Man could take without, you know, anyone seeing."

Uchiha-san hissed, "If he was from Root, then he has surely gone rogue now." He shuffled papers around, "Our efforts in keeping track of him are not as successful as we hoped, and he's refused overtures of alliance. He has since disappeared from his usual haunts. How Danzo had not gotten a hold of this boy yet, I cannot guess."

Kids can be very small. Inner Sakura argued. *We're hard to see.*

Tenten frowned as she flipped through the papers, a line forming in between her eyebrows, "He's sad," she declared, reading some message specifically for her in the different clouds of shuriken from one drawing to the next, "because Shin died. Let him be sad for a while."

"Besides, he's OK right now," Sakura added as the adults started frowning, tracing the inked birds flying up and up and up. "There aren't any cages. See?" Here and there were feathers, soft contours and freely floating, saying - *You don't know where I am, but I am fine. Don't go looking for me.*

Their help was met with accusing disbelief. After a long pause, the Yellow Flash tapped his chest and cleared his throat, "Then we won't push any further. No, Fugaku. We're not pushing. It'll only make the situation worse. We'll know when Danzo catches the rogue. He'll be made a public example of." Sakura shivered. "Team 14 knows of his status but not of his location. Alas... I'll best be off then." Then he turned towards Team 14 and placed his hands on his hips like how Clanless Bekko-sensei used to do in class, "I want to emphasize the importance of secrecy. No one outside of the seven of us is to know of this meeting. Understand?"

That means no autographs. Inner Sakura sulked.

Kiba squinted, "Seven? Are you sure? Back in the-" Then he yelped as Tenten poked him in the ribs. "I mean. Fine." (Because Mikoto-san was just a few halls away doing her motherly duties but if Kiba was about to say was true, if Mikoto-san had somehow effortlessly managed to out-maneuver both her husband the clan head and the Yellow Flash, forcing them to meet with Team 14 without either adult ever being aware of her influence, then Team 14's was not going to reveal her plans. Uchiha-san probably thought it was a simple mistake of scheduling on her part. Somehow, Mikoto-san knew what illegal acts were being made in the

village and what was to be discussed, and she wanted Team 14 to know too. *Maybe the only one in the Uchiha clan with both special eyes and special ears is her.*)

Wow. Inner Sakura gushed. *She's so cool.*

The Yellow Flash looked a little confused and a little indulgent, "Alright then. Ja." And he was gone.

Uchiha-san made a humph noise and rubbed his forehead. "That man…" Sighing, he bent down, opening and closing drawers, "Team 14." They stood to attention. "I have called you here in hopes that you will accept some gifts on behalf of myself, my family, and the entire clan." From a large box, he pulled out an assortment of weaponry, clothing, supplies, seals, armor – all sparkling new and super pricey and high-grade metals and expert craftsmanship. Sakura pushed some cloth aside, drawing back and grimacing when she pricked her finger on a three-pronged kunai. "I spoke with your presumed guardians: Orochimaru-sama," he glanced at Tenten, "Tsume-san," at Kiba, "And Inoichi-san," and at Sakura, "before these were commissioned. And perhaps you should have received this the day you received your hitai-ates - perhaps that would've occurred in a perfect world. Then again, in a perfect world, you would not need these. May they keep you safe in these troubled times."

Each bearing an armful of their presents, Team 14 slowly made their way back to the kitchens where Mikoto-san waited for them with her scary smile, holding three small bento boxes of leftovers to take home, silent in their contemplation of politics and change and the sounds of carefree laughter outside on the private clan grounds. Through a window, they saw Izumi-sempai struggling to crawl back into her wheelchair with Itachi-sensei's little brother doing his best to help. Team 14 kept walking.

"Was Team 14 a lucky accident?" Tenten asked as they emerged, blearily squinting at the sun. "Was I saved from Uenohara on a whim? Was it coincidental that I was paired with Sakura and Kiba? And we got Shisui-sensei and then Itachi-sensei because – well, someone wanted us to fail? And we stayed because we just," she waved a hand, trying to encompass all her emotions, "never actually died?"

Shisui-sensei hummed, tilting his head back, stuffing his hands into his pockets, "You're right – I don't think Team 14 was created to succeed. People knew that Itachi-kun and I were the most talented of our generation and of our age groups. They wanted to see us fail."

But you're alive. Sakura thought fiercely, grabbing and squeezing Itachi-sensei's hand as she connected the word 'fail' with 'die.' *It's easy for eleven and fourteen-year olds to die in the war. Like it's easy for six and seven-year olds. But we're all still here. That's all that matters.*

"But you three?" Shisui-sensei continued as he crouched down, pulling his mask down to stare at them in the eye, blind, "You were surprises. Even to me, at first. I must admit I did not expect much when I first read your profiles. Tenten, who had to be rescued from Uenohara before Konoha ceded the village to Ame. Kiba, who had been failing out of nearly every single one of his classes at the Academy. Sakura, who had lost her entire team before being reassigned. Yet… And yet. And now look at me, invested in a team that I had to leave in my dear cousin's hands. And my dear cousin, he talks about you three with such pride! No

one, including me, thought that Itachi and I would get this attached. Somehow, you did not fail; we did not fail; Team 14 did not fail." He straightened, "Never had. Never will."

It sounded like a promise.

They left with inner-lined fur coats with an Uchiha fan sewn onto the sleeves and Mikoto-san's warning that the cold snap was forecasted to hit tomorrow morning, each with their color-coded bundle of gifts and food to last for days. She gave each of them a warm hug and told them to not be a stranger.

Itachi-sensei saw them to the clan gates. Then, for the first time since he joined Team 14, he gathered his three students in his arms and hugged, holding on so tightly that Akamaru squeaked. Sakura could feel his breath in small puffs in the space between them. Then, after a full minute, he extricated himself and stepped back, and gave them each a pat on the head.

Mission 1921D89D: Walk the dogs of the Inuzuka kennel. Mission completion determined by clan head (designation: 007350 – Inuzuka Tsume).

The chunin at the mission desk was handing out pamphlets regarding signs of depression in all ages from children who present atypically to adults *whose list of symptoms are practically textbook according to medical literature, fuck, this hits too close to home, who's great idea was this?* Despite the simplistic captions underneath each drawing, Sakura struggled to understand the message.

Ninjas preadolescent and younger who endorsed suicidal ideation have been observed to give away prized possessions such as toys, stuffed animals, and memorabilia before they carry out their plan. It has also been noted that patients of this age range would clean and tidy their bedrooms to lessen the burden of their passing to loved ones. To report such alarming behaviors, please contact ---

Inuzuka Tsume-san clicked her tongue as she turned a page, "A little too late."

Sakura frowned at her copy, holding it above the reach of her four collies, "I don't get it."

"It's Ami. Remember the Taki border?" Kiba whispered, barely heard over the yapping of ten floppy eared puppies, "She hung herself after she came back to Konoha. One of her civilian friends found her." He crumbled the pamphlet into a ball and threw it over his shoulder. Five of the puppies, including Akamaru, tried to chase after it, whining as it landed cleanly into a bin. "Now this is useless since we're the only ones left."

Sakura stared at the little cartoon of a chibi balancing on a wooden stool while tying a heavy-duty rope to the rafters. The chibi had a ribbon tied with the knot at the top to hold her hair back, like how Sakura wore her ribbon. Black ink. Thick brush strokes. *Sai-kun drew this*. The chibi's room had a bed decorated with blooming flowers, a drawer with a mirror and metal polish, a poster of the Yellow Flash, an open window with a bird singing on the ledge, an open door. Sakura relaxed. *Still OK.*

"Only ones left?" she parroted.

Kiba held up two fingers, “We’re the last ones of our graduating class with Clanless Bekko-sensei, which is really funny because Clanless Bekko-sensei always told me that I was so stupid that I’ll be the first one gone. Hahaha. Joke’s on him.” Sakura’s brain stuttered: *We… we’re the last ones?* “And Tenten had been the only one of her class in the year above us for a long, long time.”

Sakura turned towards Tenten who was out of earshot, wrestling with five overeager wolfhound breeds, all a head taller than her and twice as wide. “She never mentioned that.”

“Tenten doesn’t mention a lot of things,” Kiba shrugged, “We just kind of go with what she wants.” Like when she insisted to the point of hysteria to surround herself with polished and sharpened weapons arranged around her in a lotus style while she slept, which was why she tended to take over more than half of any room that Team 14 had to share. Kiba and Sakura, after conferring with Itachi-sensei who gave them a book on psychiatric defense mechanisms, decided to let sleeping dogs lie. “She’s not going to kill herself. You’re not going to kill yourself… right?” Sakura shrugged and then hurriedly nodded when he grew alarmed. “And I’m not going to kill myself.” His thumb rested on his chest, “and Team 14 is the last of our class. There’s no one left. So…” He took Sakura’s pamphlet, over her protests that she wasn’t finished reading, tossed it in the trash, “no one needs to read this.”

“Damn straight,” Kiba’s mom grunted, “I raised you right.”

“Damn straight,” he echoed, earning a warning pinch on his ear. “Ow.”

“That’s still arrogance. Don’t get caught up in yourself, brat.” Inuzuka-san warned, “You too, Pink-chan, and that one with all the knives… and your two Uchihas I guess, lucky you they embody the good parts of the clan. I’m glad that you kids are watching over each other and whatever happens, I’m going to support you. This still doesn’t make me happy that Mina-chan blurted out enough information to get you thrown into T and I, intentionally or not.”

Sakura picked at the dog hairs sticking to her pant legs, “It would be bad if Danzo-sama was in charge, but he’s not. Ino’s dad is head of T and I. He would just send me back home with dried mango snacks even though I keep telling him I like strawberry.”

Kiba’s mom huffed. Her big dog said some bad words under his breath that made Kiba laugh, “Let's go save your third teammate there. Bit off more than she could chew. She looks like she’s about to be pulled into the river by my two biggest. Haruki! Let go of her shirt!”

Eventually, Team 14 headed back to the mission room with completed reports in hand. People raised their voices to make themselves heard to the various chunins sitting behind large oak desks, weighed down by piles of scrolls and paperwork. Itachi-sensei who had returned from a day long solo mission at the northern wall stood a bit ways from the crowd by the bay windows, juggling a bundle of ryo in one hand and holding onto an empty box of Pocky in another. It was easy for Team 14 and Kiba's mom to reach him; all the ninjas in the room cut a wide berth around Tenten who was still steadily dripping river mud and water. Itachi-sensei stared at Tenten's disarray with a cocked head and was about to comment on her appearance when he was interrupted by a -bang- and a flare of angry chakra.

Suddenly, all conversations were halted by the shouting at the main processing desk where a jounin commander was hauling up a screaming genin with Uchiha clan coloring and the Uchiha clan fan stitched onto her back. The genin was maybe Itachi-sensei's or Shisui-sensei's age. "-making an embarrassment of me. Shut up!" If Sakura closed her eyes, she could imagine the genin with the Haruno clan crest, with pink hair pulled out of her ribbon, with widened green eyes, green like the leaves outside her bedroom window during springtime when the sun streaked through them just right, scared to go *back.* Back to squishing and squelching and piercing and dying noises. Back to eyeballs and setting off bombs in civilian neighborhoods and bodies floating down a river and biting insects.

"You can't make me go! I don't want to die!" The genin squirmed and kicked, knocking over a container of ink and brushes, her sandals streaked black across the tile floor, kicking glass shards to the far corners, "Why can't Yoroi or Misumi go?! You give them breaks all the time! I'll die on this one!" *Oh* - the audience silently whispered, taking care to stand still. *Oh* rippled from one ninja's mind to another like a contagious disease.

"You know why you're going on this one and the next one and the next one and the next one. Your teammates have the privilege-"

"Is there a problem?" Everyone turned to the sudden, overwhelming chakra presence at the east entrance. The Sandaime tucked his pipe away as he cut a path through the onlookers to the front of the room, not too fast, not too slow.

The jounin turned horribly red. The Sandaime rarely makes visits to the mission room and to have this greet him... "It is of no consequence, Hokage-sama. I apologize for the trouble. Make no mistake I've had ample experience on how to deal with disobedient, unruly Uchiha children." The jounin shook her charge once more by the collar, so rough that the genin choked; among the audience, some gazes flickered towards Itachi-sensei for a reaction. Itachi-sensei did not move. Sakura stole a glance about the room, gauging the audience: horror, sick fascination, resignation, sadness. And an undertone of - waiting. *But nobody was helping*. Sakura looked down at her shaking hands - *Anything anyone does would only make it worse.* Waiting... Waiting... *Not yet...*

"Hokage-sama," the genin pleaded, "I'm so tired. I don't want to go but they make me keep going. I'll almost die and I'll almost die and I'll dream of how I'll almost die and eventually die and one day, I will die."

The Sandaime smiled, eyes crinkling at the edges, "I'm sure you'll be just fine, Uchiha-san."

The genin's eyes widened and flickered red - black - red - black. "You... You don't care either!" The genin accused after a beat, "You don't care at all! Let me go, sensei! You're sending me to die! I have to - I have to do - I'll... I'll cut off my own legs! Like Izumi-san! Just watch me!" The jounin pulled her away, the genin's heels dragging on the tile floor. The genin's fingers tightened against the trim of the doorway; the wood cracked beneath her fingers. "You can make me go but you can't make me not cripple myself - I have to have kunai for missions, right?! You can't make me go if I have no legs! You can't stop me! You can't---" And the door slammed shut behind them.

Lots of people were still whispering and murmuring under their breaths. *This is wrong.*

Kiba's mom glared at anyone who was pointing at Team 14 and Itachi-sensei, "Thank the Sage that she didn't see you and force your hand as clan heir." She told Itachi-sensei casually. "You should get back to your family. I can watch over these three while you take care of some issues that have no doubt cropped up within the last minute." Looking like he wanted to say no, Itachi-sensei gave a stiff nod and was gone, leaving behind a small whirlwind of leaves.

In the stunned atmosphere, the Sandaime, still smiling and puffing calming at his pipe, cleared his throat pointedly. Immediately, business slowly picked back up and eventually continued on as usual. Most of the audience left, muttering that they'll be back later once the lines die down, ducking their heads as they passed their Hokage.

"Come on, kids," Kiba's mom told Team 14. "That's our cue to leave."

“It feels really weird sometimes. Like I'm not part of it - just watching and watching and watching from a safe place. But I know that I'm not in a safe place,” Sakura told Kiba’s mom much later in the evening as Team 14 ate their post-mission strawberry cakes in a bright kitchen, unable to taste anything but ash and bile. “It’s like being in a story. There’s plot conflict and there’s main characters and there’s a big bad.”

"Oh? And who is the 'big bad'?" Kiba's mom asked as she gathered extra bedding and pillows from the spare closet.

“Mostly the Bandaged Man,” Tenten answered in a *well, obviously* tone of voice, pushing her half-eaten slice of cake from one side of the plate to the other. “He took a lot of kids before he took Sai. The only reason why he didn’t take me was because Yakushi-san told him I was too ‘high profiled.’ Nobody stops him. You can't even talk about it."

"Danzo-sama," Sakura needlessly clarified. "And..." She hesitated, "Others too, who let him." *Like the Hokage.*

Kiba slapped his hands against the table. "And if the Hokage didn't say anything at the mission desk, then he will say nothing for anything else. If the Hokage isn't going to do anything, then who will? He's like,” His eyes widened, "this big monster that won't change - he won't listen, he won't bend any of his beliefs. He believes really hard."

Kiba’s mom bared her teeth, “Be more optimistic, Kiba-kun, and think. If our enemy cannot bend, then eventually, he will break.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mission 1930C32C: Assist academy teacher (designation: 011850 - Umino Iruka) as temporary aides for outdoor demonstrations and teamwork training.

"--- new guests who I'm sure all of you have heard of in some manner or another. Now behave for them or else I'll send you to the halls for the duration of this lesson." Umino-san cleared his throat, "I'll now open the floor for a few minutes." Immediately, half of the class raised their hands and half of the class shouted out question after question.

"Ohhh!" Someone cried out in the back row, "It's Team 14! Pick me. Pick me!"

"Hey! Is it true that Tenten-san killed three Iwa monsters with one toothpick at West Willow Valley?!"

"Kotetsu-kun and Izumo-kun told me that the Inuzuka has a collection of teeth from his fallen enemies and that the Haruno has a kekkei genkai where she can explode limbs with just a touch??? Please tell me they're not lying!" Sakura twitched. *The Inuzuka. The Haruno.*

"Weren't you at their award ceremony, dumbass? The Hokage listed out every deed they did!"

Sakura shuffled her feet and scratched her ear with a pinky. *When was the award ceremony? What happened at the award ceremony?* Not a second later, Inner Sakura snapped her fingers. *Right. The award ceremony.* The sun had been bright, not a cloud in the sky, the birds were chirping, the wild flowers swayed in the gentle breeze, the crowds chatted and cheered, and the hokage's robes billowed when he gestured at Team 14 to bend at the waist, one by one, to receive their medals of distinction. Just before her turn, Tenten had coughed wetly and wiped onto her white shirt, a gift from her orphanage, leaving behind a smeared, bloody handprint, a lingering injury from a past mission. The hokage's smile had grown strained and the crowd got quiet.

"The old man talked too long! I fell asleep, ahahahaha-"

"Neh, neh, Iruka-sensei! Are they going to teach us anything?"

Iruka-sensei clapped his hands twice and cleared his throat. Chairs screeched across linoleum floors and slowly the rabble fell into silence. "I'll leave that up to our guests," he turned to face Tenten whom he had, based on age and height, assumed to be leader, "what do you have in mind?"

Tenten hemmed and hawed as Sakura peered over her shoulder apologetically. "We didn't really stay long in the Academy, Iruka-sensei. We didn't learn much." *We can teach them how to kill people: twelve ways for grown-ups and eight ways for an enemy our size.*

“Then surely you have stories of your heroics,” he encouraged. “Uplifting ones?”

…Uplifting? Stories? What is he talking about? “What about first kills?” Kiba piped up, joining the huddle. Akamaru barked in agreement as Iruka-sensei’s smile froze. “Those are important. I killed my first enemy by tearing out his throat. I can talk about that.”

“Uh, maybe something else-”

“Not unless you want to get sent back to the war front, idiot.” Tenten snorted.

“What do you mean?” Iruka-sensei asked, but Team 14 ignored him.

“Yeah, remember?” Sakura hissed, “This is the clan heir class. I told you that Ino and her friends told me that Clanless Bekko-sensei taught them for just one day, just one day, but got it wrong, and he was sent to the war front as punishment. We have to be careful. Do you want to be sent back out?”

Kiba rapidly shook his head as Tenten tilted her head back in thought, “I wonder what happened to him,” she wondered aloud.

Kiba shrugged, “I bet he’s dead. … He couldn’t even hold chalk right, remember?” he mimicked Clanless Bekko-sensei’s tremor and pretended to write on the board.

“Yeah, probably,” Sakura agreed. “Can you imagine him holding a kunai without cutting himself?” Tenten giggled and Kiba snorted at the imagery.

As one, Team 14 turned towards Iruka-sensei who had been growing paler and paler as they talked and was now white as a ghost. “We would like for you to choose, Iruka-sensei. … Iruka-sensei?” Tenten waved a hand in front of his face, “Are you there? Helloooo?”

And someone in the back row yelled, “Sensei! What did they say? What are they teaching us?”

Iruka-sensei closed his eyes, drew in a deep breath, and pinched the bridge of his nose. His fingers had smooth kunai callouses; his face was unmarred. “Change of plans. We’re going outside.”

The class cheered.

Iruka-sensei had Team 14 stand in the middle of the open field and had the class split into teams of three to ambush them one by one. Team 14 threw them all back within ten minutes of the whistle. Iruka-sensei stared at the various groaning children surrounding Team 14. Sakura was scratching the back of her head, wondering if she should apologize for throwing dirt into their faces before kicking them in the shins. Tenten was loudly bemoaning the quality of the Academy’s practice kunais. Kiba cooed at Akamaru for scaring all the other teams away from his blind spot – *Who’s a good boy? Who’s a good boy?* “Class? To me,” Iruka-sensei shouted, “Let’s rearrange ourselves to make this harder for them.”

Then, it was six on three. Then, it was nine on three. On and on, the ratio grew, until the entire class of fifteen, even the younger ones, rushed at Team 14 like a wall. Iruka-sensei

yelled out encouragement and reminders that, “this is a team exercise! You must work together! Combine your strengths and cover each other’s weaknesses! Look how Team 14 is angled against each other! Look how they have established who is in the short-range, mid-range, and long-range defenders.”

It was awfully cute.

Ino’s eyes had glinted when the class stepped out into the sunlight, fists at her side. She had been unrelentingly aiming at Sakura to the point that Shikamaru-kun and Chouji-kun jumped like a fire was lit under their butts, trying to save her when she got real close, yelling out stuff like – *shell shock, post-traumatic stress disorder, hypervigilance, be careful Ino*. But Sakura didn’t mind the attention or the fighting. It was fun. There was nothing on this beautiful day to remind her of eyeballs and bug bites and explosions and blood sprays like wings. Sakura bent backwards away from Ino’s clumsy swipe and prodded with her toe at Ino’s left foot, causing her to unbalance and stumble.

Sakura tapped the side of her neck, “dead.” Ino growled and leaped back but Sakura followed, flitting to her flank and lashing out at the back of her knees. Sakura tapped the spot right below her sternum, “Usually dead.” Behind them, Shikamaru yelped as Tenten intercepted his moving shadows with another barrage of subpar Academy practice kunai. Chouji was not faring better with Kiba.

“Gahh! Stop it! Stop teasing me! Take me seriously!” Ino retreated further, out of range, and stretched out her arms, making a diamond with her fingers, like how Yamanaka Santa did during Sakura’s therapy sessions. “You’ll pay for this!”

Sakura braced for the special Yamanaka clan jutsu. A few seconds ticked by, but she didn’t feel the familiar whoosh feeling of her stomach dropping. Inner Sakura snickered as Sakura cocked her head in confusion. “Umm, Ino? What are you doing?”

Ino faltered and then smacked her own forehead, “Forgot that daddy told me that this one doesn’t work on you. Fine! I don’t need my special clan techniques anyways!” She gritted her teeth and raised her fist, charging at Sakura with a yell “Haaaah” who easily dodged again. Sakura laughed, pulling on Ino’s wrist and yanking her forward, ready to deal another fake death blow when-

A flare of chakra and a gust of wind to her left. *Shunshin.* “Nii-san!” Uchiha Sasuke yelled.

Sakura spun on her heels as Tenten and Kiba shouted excitedly, “Itachi-sensei! We’re winning!”

“No, you’re not!” Uchiha Sasuke protested, face covered in mud, “I can still fight! Come on! Naruto! Get up you oaf-” He tripped over Shino Aburame. Itachi-sensei swept up his two students under his arms and walked over to his little brother who was beginning to glow red under the dirt with jealousy.

“Give up, loser,” Kiba stuck out his tongue, “You hit like a…” and here he paused, staring at Tenten, then at Sakura, then at the Inuzuka compound walls where his mother and sister dwelled. “You hit like a cat.”

Uchiha Sasuke screeched.

Ino tapped Sakura on the shoulder, holding out two fingers. “It’s the seal of reconciliation,” she explained as Sakura stared down in confusion, “You do the same and then I take your fingers and hook it…” It was like shaking hands but smaller. “Yeah. Like that. And it’s done! So…” Ino then patted Sakura’s shoulder, “that was fun. I had fun.”

“Un!” Sakura nodded vigorously. “I had fun too.”

“I’m getting better.” Sakura nodded. “And I’ll get even more better when I spar with you next time.” Sakura kept nodding. Ino puffed out her cheeks, “and you can come with me to daddy and we’ll tell him that you didn’t hurt me when we fought.” Sakura shook her head, imagining Ino’s dad and his sad face. “Not just that,” Ino added, “He wants to talk to you today.”

“Am I in trouble?” Sakura worried her sleeve.

At first, Ino waved her hands like *I don’t know* but then quickly shook her head when Sakura’s eyes began to tear up. “No way! I don’t think so. He wanted to tell you super-secret stuff which, shhhh, you shouldn’t tell anyone, but he didn’t look mad.”

Iruka-sensei called his students back to his side and they flocked, like baby ducks to their mama ducks. He herded them back to the Academy, down the busy marketplace and lazy neighborhoods. Itachi-sensei, burdened by two kids hanging off him like limpets, helped his little brother to his feet. Uchiha Sasuke scrambled onto his back and claimed a perch at his shoulders. They passed by notice-me orange paint graffiti that wrote lots of questions in elaborate calligraphy, dripping pain and thick brush strokes. The graffiti wondered how many Uchihas have been killed this week alone and when Konoha would run out of Uchihas left to fight. And once there aren’t any Uchihas left, who is next?

The Academy students clamored around Iruka-sensei, demanding an explanation. *Iruka-sensei, what does this me-e-e-ean?* Iruka-sensei had turned white and then red, reaching behind into the crowd to grab an ear and yanked upward, “Naruto! Your prank is extremely disrespectful to those who defend our village. You are in big trouble, young man!”

But Uzumaki Naruto whined, “It’s not me, -ttebayo! It’s not me! Ow!”

It’s Sai-kun. Sakura crossed her arms, crouching down to read the very bottom line.

WHAT DO YOU WANT? WHAT ARE YOU WILLING TO DO TO GET IT?

I hope he’s OK. Sakura squinted at the birds and the kunai in the four corners of the picture. No cages. *He says he’s still OK. Wherever he is.*

“Come on,” Ino yelled into her ear, “You’re so slow!”

Sakura allowed herself to be tugged away, stumbling as they crisscrossed between wagons and caravans, cutting through alleyways and small streets. Iruka-sensei had dismissed the class early, clearly intent on forcing Uzumaki Naruto to clean up Sai-kun’s work. Sakura

didn't mind. Enough people already saw by now. Enough people would be thinking and deciding.

Wisteria was blooming in the Yamanaka compound, framing the high walls and the archways in light purple. Ino ran through the front gates, yelling, "Daddy! I'm home! I brought Sakura with me!" Sakura stalled by the two guards, peering through – Ino had already disappeared into the main house. The guard on her left smiled and gently pushed her over the threshold to follow.

Ino's dad was wearing his flower shop apron, talking with Ino's mom while Ino danced around them, demanding attention. He straightened, wincing through the popping joints like papa used to, and waved her over, "Sakura-chan! It has been a while since I've last seen you!" He turned to Ino's mom, "Dear, can you take Ino over to the training grounds? She's already behind on her lessons."

Ino's mom guided Ino away who was still chatting, "- and then there was more pictures of how we're all going to die if the war doesn't stop and Naruto, that idiot, was asking why would everyone die but-" Ino's dad flared his chakra in beats of two, which he usually did during her sessions with Yamanaka Santa – it was his super-secret message to her, telling her to not talk until he gave her the special code word. "- bye Sakura! You should stay for dinner. And then we can have a sleepover! And then I can tell you how Naruto-baka stole Sasuke-kun's first kiss!" She waved goodbye as she trotted to the fields.

Ino's dad guided Sakura into the main house, down a set of stairs behind a door that practically blended with the walls, swiping his thumb across another insignia, leaving behind a streak of blood, revealing another endless hallway. Sakura dogged his footsteps, careful not to fall behind as she ducked under the atmospheric cobwebs and torches. She had so many questions but pinched her own mouth shut. Ino's dad didn't say anything until they reached the second door to the end of the tunnel and in any other circumstance, she would be screaming about kidnapping by now. *But I trust Ino's dad. Sort of.*

"Report," Ino's dad said. Sakura heaved a dramatic sigh of relief and started coughing as she had accidentally inhaled tunnel dust. Ino's dad blinked in disbelief, "Did you hold your breath again?"

"It's hard!" She whined.

Ino's dad clasped his hand over his eyes and asked the Sage for patience. "You… Nevermind that." He was about to twist the doorknob when he hesitated. "A few days ago, Nara Shikaku received an odd message from an ink construct of a tiger who gave us the window of time when your mother was left unguarded." Sakura blinked. *Sai-kun…* "Coincidentally, that window of time was when I had decided to escort out an old family friend from her holding cell, as there was nothing in the books requiring her to stay there without trial within the first four days and no legal precedence to arrest someone who has technically not clearly and without a doubt incited any rebellion against the government."

"Coincidentally," Sakura echoed, squinting at the door as if she had Hyuuga eyes.

Ino's dad bent down until he was at eye level, "This is just between you and me, alright?" Sakura nodded. "Nara Shikaku and Akimichi Chouza are aware but I can't risk you discussing them the particulars. You are most familiar with my mannerisms and chakra signature. If you have pressing concerns, you come to me, understood?" Sakura nodded again. "Good."

He opened the door.

Sakura staggered back.

Mama laid on an inclined bed, dressed in layers of hospital gown light green, covered in a thin gray blanket. She had none of papa's lines and fluid bags and beeping monitors and tubes. "Mama? Mama?" No response. Sakura inspected mama's wrist, fingers dancing over all the bony prominences (Thin. So, so, so thin.) before finally pressing on her pulse point – regular but weak. "She's not dead," Sakura stated, watching the subtle rise and fall of the blanket every five seconds, "Is-is mama dying?"

"What? No!" Ino's dad hurriedly rushed over, "No. No. Please don't cry. Nothing of that sort. Oh dear, this is not how-"

"Then why isn't she saying anything?" She demanded.

"She's in an induced coma." He explained, "Her recovery requires rest of the mind. We've established daily checks on her mental status until she's cleared to wake." Sakura sagged against mama in relief. "We decided to notify you once we have a clear idea of her prognosis. It is promising."

"Oh. OK." She burrowed her face into mama's blanket. Mama's hand rested on her head and if she closed her eyes, if she could imagine that mama was awake and petting her hair, cajoling her towards the kitchen to trim her bangs because *Sakura, they're so long. How do you see through them? Your forehead isn't that big. It's the perfect size.* "Thank you."

And thank you too, Sai-kun.

She stayed in that awkward position until her back and neck started to ache, counting to five with every inhalation and exhalation, matching her own breathing to that of mama's. She was dimly aware of the buzzing of the air vents and her own heart beat in her ears. Ino's dad didn't make a sound until she slowly pulled away and gave mama one last hug.

"I am rectifying wrongs." Ino's dad spoke like he was confessing, "I hope I am, at least here, on the right path."

Sakura tugged at his ponytail, still short from the Kumo Crush, and hummed, "I think you're doing OK."

Mission 1934B14B: Find and retrieve target (designation: 002302 - Senju Tsunade). Attached is funding required to pay off all known debts with interest.

Hyuuga Hizashi's chakra felt like Neji-sempai's chakra – white, solid, righteous, and protective. He had arrived at the west gates with Aburame Shikuro and held himself stiffly, always three paces to the right of Sakura's field of vision. She tried not to care and instead distracted herself by watching Tenten wheedled out a promise for practice sword forms from Orochimaru-sama who was trying to look disapproving at her boldness. *Shameless.*

Throughout their journey to Tanzaku-gai, Neji-sempai's dad was like a ghost, flitting in and out of the air, flying away to the trees or sinking into the ground just when Sakura opened her mouth to start a conversation or to properly give condolences. Often, out of the corner of her eye, Aburame Shikuro elbowed the man, trying to push him forward. Aburame-san ended up speaking for both, becoming the de facto leader when Orochimaru-sama, after being rebuffed by Senju-sama for the third time, ran out of patience and called this whole mission a *waste of time, I suggest kidnapping her apprentice – she would follow, unwillingly, but yes, she would follow*.

"We can also use seals to bind them, right? A big ambush and then make them talk and find out their weak points," Tenten had suggested, holding a sealed scroll high above her head to make a point, "For your problem, Orochimaru-sama, and Sakura's problem," she stared pointedly at the blank spot to Aburame-san's left. Sakura covered her burning cheeks and groaned. "If we make the seal before bedtime, Orochimaru-sama said that he'll let me practice with Kusanagi!"

Aburame-san twitched. "You're very effective in molding kunoichis to your likeness, venerable Snake Sannin," he said mildly. "Are you wondering why? Mitarashi-san was informing me under the influence of liberal uses of alcohol how she saved an entire contingent of Uchihas at Valley of the End."

Orochimaru-sama preened. "It is what they asked from me. Now, my dear apprentice," he patted Tenten's head, "that is an excellent idea. Allow me to show you the seals that I would use. We will have a demonstration outside." Tenten cheered and trotted after her mentor out of the building as Aburame-san stared down at his cup of sake and waved the bartender for another.

"Come sit, Sakura-chan," he invited, ordering a glass of water for her and a small plate of browned takoyaki, sitting in a pool of sauce, topped with mayonnaise, bonito flakes, and seaweed, "Let's wait for your friend and the venerable Snake Sannin to reemerge from their experiments." The air was heavy, white, and protective – she fought against the urge to fall asleep on the counter and instead busied herself by spinning in her stool until she grew dizzy.

Aburame-san was reading a newspaper sent from the Fire capital; he has been reading the cover for the last twenty minutes. *Détente Between the Nations. BUT FOR HOW LONG?*

Sakura could almost imagine the katakana shifting into other words. *Konoha is Unified. BUT FOR HOW LONG? For How Long Will Our Sandaime Hokage Wear the Hat? For How Long Will Our Roots Grow? For How Long Will We Fight?* She popped the last takoyaki into her mouth and chased it with water, jerking to attention when, out of the corner of her vision, Aburame-san heaved a great sigh.

“The vagaries of fate are not as predetermined as I had thought,” Aburame-san mused, draining his sake and then flagging the bartender for his third refill, “to have us together, it was due to outside forces but in that way of comrades I am well familiar with. I… had… have… had a son your age,” He slumped on his stool and dragged a hand over his face, shuddering with each breath, the picture of a grieving father.

“I’m sorry,” she offered.

“You have apologized enough,” Aburame-san replied, which confused her because she was fairly certain that this was the first adult Aburame that she had ever talked to. Kiba was the member of Team 14 that was familiar with the clan, going on and on about Shino said this and Shino did that and *Shino got mad at me again Sakura, can you tell your Yamanaka friend to send sorry flowers again? I’ll pay you back.* “Perhaps too much. It wasn’t your fault at all. I just,” he took a shaky breath and pressed his shaking hands onto the counter, “I never thought I would outlive my child.”

Sakura’s expression turned flinty. *Grown-ups are great at lying.* “Torune-san, right? Your son?”

“…yes.”

Inner Sakura face-palmed and groaned in despair. *OK.* She mentally cracked her knuckles and cleared her throat. This was like talking to mama when she was in jail. This was like yelling at Tenten through the gap at the bottom of the bathroom door to not hog all the hot water. *Shannaro! I can do this.* “Your son knew… knows how much you love him. He loves you too. Lots and lots.” She soothed, hand hovering over his, before giving a single awkward pat, “Because, you’re his papa… Torune-san’s dad… and yeah.”

Aburame-san ran a hand through his hair before remembering that he was wearing a happuri-styled helmet that encompassed all his scalp. Sakura watched him squirm. “You’re a good kid, Sakura-chan. Excuse me. I am in dire need of fresh air.” He stumbled to his feet, pushing back his stool with a loud creak, and patted her on the head. He left behind eight empty sake cups. The bartender sighed.

A minute later, Aburame-san reentered the room, sure-footed and without that drunk swaying walk. He reclaimed his stool and ordered a glass of baiju. While waiting for his drink, he stared at the eight glasses of sake for a solid ten seconds before shaking his head, “Hyuugas,” he muttered with face buried in his hands, “So, Sakura-chan. Did I apologize adequately to you?”

He’s not even trying. Sakura shrugged, “Yeah. You were OK,” still thinking about the Henge and how the technique can’t hide chakra that is white, solid, righteous, protective. She was suddenly reminded of the little incense mound outside of the Hyuuga compound gates that needs to be swept and cleaned. *Later*. She promised to herself, adding in a mental reminder to buy more chrysanthemums.

“Good,” Aburame-san grunted. “You are wondering why I am pleased. You will learn, Sakura-chan, that most problems can be solved with time, an under the table request for a

specific mission with specific persons, and a swift kick in the ass." He paused, "Please do not repeat that last word."

They sat like that for a long time and Sakura was just starting to nod off when their peace was interrupted by sounds from outside the bar, beyond the double doors leading to the outside world - explosions, screams, cackling (Tenten), and *hwehwehweh* laughter (Orochimaru-sama) reached their ears. Sakura jerked to attention, a kunai in hand. Aburame-san pretended very hard to not heard the sounds. The bartender took his cue. Sakura glanced over her shoulder, "Maybe we should-"

"No."

"But-"

Aburame-san sighed and set down his finished cup, "This is what negotiations with the Sannin often develop into, Sakura-chan. It is inevitable." The roof shuddered; dust fell onto the countertop. Sakura strained her ears. *Was… was that a pig???* "It is the nature of S-ranked ninjas to accomplish missions in the most erratic manner." Tenten was shouting, words indistinct among the sounds of small explosions. *Tenten is mad.* "We will investigate but not interfere," Aburame-san corrected and then he observed, "Your friend seemed to be taking the mission personally."

"Tenten wanted a role model. A good one," Sakura explained as Aburame-san paid for their tab. "She told me that most girls at the orphanage take Senju-sama as their role model. Senju-sama was once Tenten's role because Senju-sama is a woman who can heal and break boulders into dust with her pinky all at the same time. But when Tenten went to the Academy, there was no Senju-sama. And when Tenten went to fight, Senju-sama wasn't there either. Right?" Aburame-san slowly nodded. "So Tenten had to find another role model."

"Orochimaru-sama isn't a woman," Aburame-san pointed out.

Sakura shrugged, "Close enough." She drummed her fingers on the counter, drawing little circles with the condensation left by her glass of water. "Senju-sama is…" She made a frustrated sound, unable to articulate the betrayal she felt when she learned from Clanless Bekko-sensei about how Senju-sama refused to be sent to any battlefield and instead just walked out of the village to do adult fun things. *Tsunade-sama left because her lover and her nephew died*. *Our esteemed Hokage saw fit to let her grieve.* "She never got punished for running away and the war is too scared to touch her because she's a Senju. But the Uchihas have to go. I have to go. You have to go."

Aburame-san nodded. "Ah. You are disappointed."

"And yesterday, when we met her, she said I was talented at chakra scalpels for my age and then she said that… that…" Sakura puffed her cheeks in anger. *You can't heal? You use medical chakra and you can't heal? Shizune, look at her. That is a contradiction that I never thought I'd ever see. Hahahahaha---* "She can't *say* that." *She has no right!* Inner Sakura raged. *So presumptuous! So rude! So drunk!* "Because I didn't know how to stop Izumi-sempai from losing her second leg or make Shisui-sensei's eyes better or get papa to wake up, but she doesn't-"

She was interrupted by a wave of chakra that tickled her arms. Then, silence. Even the pig's distressed squeals quieted. She and Aburame-san stood up at the same time. "Come." He said, adjusting his sunglasses and high collar, "Let's go see what the rest of our team has done to our illustrious guests."

Outside, Hyuuga Hizashi, Orochimaru-sama, and Tenten stood around a sealing circle etched into the grass, trapping Senju-sama, her apprentice, and her apprentice's pig within. Senju-sama was pacing and spitting out words that would make mama wash out her mouth with soap. As Sakura and Aburame-san approached, Senju-sama narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips, "Oh, look. More people to come and gawk. It's the pink one who likes the pervert's book."

Sakura frowned, "What's a pervert?"

"Tsunade-sama," her apprentice hissed, "Please."

"Then what should I call her, Shizune, if not the pink one?" Senju-sama waved carelessly at Sakura's direction, purposely misunderstanding her apprentice's words, "The little girl whose chakra control is on the ninetieth percentile but still doesn't know how to heal? The little girl who uses medical chakra to only hurt? The contradiction? Oh look, she's crying again."

Sakura gritted her teeth. "S-shut up."

"Tsunade-sama. You are drunk."

"Oh ho? The pink one has some bite! Sakura-san, isn't it? Let me do you a favor and give you some life advice that I gave to your little friend here." Senju-sama wagged a finger at Tenten who silently bared her teeth, "When you see as much as I see, you learn to take the hurts that you experience, and mark my word, you will always collect these hurts, and these hurts build and build and build---"

Senju-sama was close enough that Sakura could smell the alcohol. Nobody stopped Senju-sama from talking and talking and talking… Sakura took a deep breath and interrupted Senju-sama. "There is a wolf at my door."

There was a stunned silence. "…Excuse me?"

Iruka-sensei has a class of fifteen clan heirs. Then there is Team 14. There is Sai. Fifteen plus three plus one equals to nineteen. There are nineteen children under the age of ten in Konoha. The war took everyone else. "There is a wolf at my door." Sakura repeated, staring ahead at nothing in particular, "The wolf can't come in, but mama and papa have to open the door eventually. The wolf dragged them out and ate them. But the wolf is still hungry and so it continues to hunt."

She held her hands out, palms up. "Sometimes the wolf eats in one big swallow. Other times, the wolf eats in little pieces. When the wolf doesn't eat too much, the wolf can be polite and says thank you for your service, Sakura-chan, go home and rest. Eventually, the wolf comes back. Mama and papa are gone. I have to open the door eventually.

“Imagine seeing the wolf through the window, prowling and waiting. You see its teeth. You know its voice. For those people who never felt his teeth,” Sakura shrugged, “you don’t have to feel a wolf’s teeth to fear them. When the wolf talks, he talks with a bloody muzzle.”

“Everyone deals with the wolf in their own way. Some pretend that the wolf doesn’t exist, doesn’t hear the howling at night. But people like me can’t ignore it. The wolf chews and it hurts. That’s my hurt. My hurt is the same as other people’s hurts. Different bite marks in different places. Same teeth. But…” She tilted her head and thought about mama, resting in a room underneath Yamanaka clan grounds. “But more people are asking why the wolf is here. The wolf doesn’t have to be in Konoha, prowling from door to door. Now I have people who care, and when enough people are with me, they can make the voices small. We share our hurts and get stronger because we know we're not alone. More people listen and they’re all trying, and their trying is like a flame, burning and burning, jumping from leaves to leaves, trees to trees, house to house. Trying to learn the key to peace – love, belief, protection – and their trying changes something here.” Sakura tapped her heart. "Something burns."

“The war continues. The wolf will howl again. But now, I have the Will of Fire.”

Chapter End Notes

Sakura's "There's a wolf at my door" speech is inspired by the "My father roars" scene from Four Roads Cross by Max Gladstone.

Chapter 8

Operation Yondaime

Team 14 reunited with their third teammate at an outpost on the most western point of the Hokage Province border. After many hugs, Kiba started rubbing his wrists against Tenten's neck, "You stink." Akamaru pawed at Sakura's sandals to be picked up and then proceeded to start licking her chin. Behind Kiba, an entire crowd of Konoha ninjas emerged from the tree tops, all wearing the jounin-standard, tanned, travelling cloaks. Orochimaru-sama made a low inquiring noise and sheathed his sword.

Tenten wrinkled her nose and sneezed, "you smell gross too and you're taking too long. Just give me one of your shirts later." She squinted over Kiba's hood, "Why do you have so many Hyuugas with you? Are they here for Hizashi-san?"

"Dunno. They wanted to come along." Kiba shrugged, "At first it was supposed to be me, ma, and Genma-san. Remember Genma-san? The guy from the Taki Border?" As Kiba jerked a thumb over his shoulder, Genma-san's head popped out, over the crowd of perfectly Hyuuga-straight, Hyuuga-black hair, senbon flashing under the moonlight; he gave a cheerful wave.

"Team 14," he greeted after side-stepping through the press of bodies, "It has been a while, hasn't it?"

"I guess?" Tenten replied, a bit unsure. "What's going on?"

With Akamaru draped over her head like a hat, Sakura inched towards the watchtower and strained her ears at the large group of adults. "-returning to be intercepted…" Kiba's mom was saying, occasionally pointing at different members of her audience, "… unofficial inquiry… to be sheltered…" Genma-san yanked back on her collar before she could venture any closer.

"Nothing to worry about. Some political sabotage and possible treason. You know how it is." He winked, as if sharing a joke. Tenten sniffed. "Or not. Tough crowd," he huffed, reaching behind and pulling out three folded, miniature jounin-standard, tanned travelling cloaks, "I come bearing gifts. Go on… Aww, just like little adults." He plucked at their hems and wiped off imaginary dirt, "They're the same make as ours with camouflage seals sewn in by Uzumaki-san. You'll be wearing them, hood up, from now until we get you three into the Hyuuga compound."

"What?" Kiba tilted his head and frowned, "But ma said-"

"I know what I said," Kiba's mom shunshined into the conversation, "Sorry, kiddo. Plans keep changing at the last minute. The Hyuugas have been gracious enough to offer political sanctuary until…" She scratched her neck, "Sage help us all. I don't have an answer but its

going to be soon. I hope Minato knows what he's doing." Her dog pawed at the ground and snorted.

"Don't let anyone see your faces," Genma-san wagged his finger, "We'll do our due diligence in keeping the Hokage's eyes averted," he glanced at the two Sannin who's heads were bowed together. Senju-sama cracked her knuckles and accepted a small snake summon into her sleeve. "Some of us will no doubt be more effective than others. Senju-sama's arrival will be very distracting indeed."

"Excellent," Kiba's mom bared her teeth. She spun around and clapped her hands, "Team! We have three hours before dawn. Let's move out in five."

No one spoke for the rest of the trip, concentrating on their sandals and chakra and the low 'tap, tap, tap' as they hopped from branch to branch. Here a brushing against the wild grass and there a rustling of summer leaves. Kiba's mom took the group towards the lesser-used south entrance where two chunins checked their papers, gaze passing over Team 14's heads, and ushered them through. Konoha slept, snoring like crickets and cicadas and owls and the last customers stumbling out of closing bars. Sai-kun's drawings littered the neighborhood gutters and peeled off shop windows – YONDAIME – he wrote under a sketch of the Yellow Flash. At the marketplace, an ink graffiti of a smoking pipe was captioned with: CHILDKILLER – bordered by two dancing monkeys. There was a flyer on a telephone pole announcing a public trial scheduled tomorrow evening in the main square. And then...

They stood before a set of wooden doors marked with the Hyuuga clan symbol. Beyond laid a cobblestone pathway, surrounded by black pine trees and rock gardens. Kiba's mom ruffled Kiba's hair goodbye. Team 14 was taken to a two-story machiya where they toed off their sandals, guided past a maze of corridors that echoed their footsteps. Eventually, they stood before a traditionally furnished room, three unrolled futons atop tatami mats laying invitingly against the wall.

The door slid closed behind them.

"Umm… OK. So..."

Tenten tapped against the cedar walls, searching for weak spots. Kiba and Sakura arranged a simple tripwire snare by the shoe shelf. Hours later, as the moon rose and crossed from one window to the next, Sakura laid in her futon, staring up at the ceiling, arms outstretched, with a strange itch sitting just underneath her skin that even a hot shower couldn't fix. *Just like bijuu chakra…*

Team 14 enjoyed a silent breakfast of steamed rice, miso soup, egg rolls, grilled fish, and pickled cucumbers, Sakura set off in search for incense, noting how various members of the Hyuuga clan remained slightly out of her direct line of sight, pruning the cypress, sweeping dust off the front steps, chatting in low voices among themselves with their special clan eyes activated, bulging veins extending down to their cheeks. Hizashi-san took her to the family shrine at her request and five minutes later, Tenten found her kneeling before a headstone, well-tended, draped in flowers and gifts.

"Hyuuga Neji," Tenten read aloud.

“This is Neji-sempai,” Sakura touched the embedded kanji, “Neji-sempai, this is Tenten.” Neji-sempai was Tenten’s age. If the war hadn’t ruined everyone’s lives, maybe they could’ve been in the same class, maybe even the same genin team, learning under the same jounin sensei.

Tenten understood that too. “Hi Neji-san,” she wiggled her fingers at the headstone and hugged her knees. “Did you ever wonder – what if,” she whispered to Sakura, “What could’ve happened?”

“Yeah.” Sakura drew little shapes in the dirt with a stick, “But it doesn’t matter. It’s just us now.”

“Yeah.” Tenten tilted her head back and faced the blue sky and yellow sun. “You know…” She closed her eyes. “There used to be so many kids in the orphanage. So many that there wasn’t enough food and clothes and beds; back when the war was taking parents and not us. There were many people who could’ve been my teammates. Hosei. Inomatsu.” She grinned, “There was this loud kid with these huge eyebrows like caterpillars.” Her smile disappeared as fast as it had appeared, “He was one of the last ones to be taken away. Everyone kept leaving and never coming back; some disappeared in the middle of the night. Nono-san didn’t talk about it and didn’t want me to ask, so I didn’t ask. For a long time, it was just me and Kabuto-kun. Then, it was just me. Then, I got sent to Uenohara.”

Uenohara was where Tenten met Kiba and Sakura.

“The entire time I was there, the rest of the village kept going, you know. Even as the orphanage got smaller and smaller. The villagers bought stuff and sold other stuff and made their food and ate their food and talked about normal things - but it wasn’t normal. It was like,” She paused, “It was like knowing that Iwa was four days away, but you couldn’t pack up and run. All you could do was wait and talk about how Mai-san’s cucumbers were doing. The waiting is the worst part.” She glanced behind where Kiba was feeding the carp. “This is like that too except even closer. No one told us anything since we got here. Did you notice that? How bad do you think it is out there?”

Tenten was right. The waiting was the worst part.

Which is why after the sun rose and fell, night rushing in like closing curtains, Sakura couldn’t summon any surprise as she was pulled out of her dreams of strawberry candies and tasteless ration bars, from Akamaru licking her face awake to staring at a figure suspended in the air by three barely-there lines of tripwire, looking more like a used knife block than a ninja. She felt more relief than anything else as her eyes followed the blood dripping down the faceless mask, down the folds of the ANBU armor, onto the shoe shelf, pooling in her favorite slippers: the fluffy pink ones with the bunny ears and the whiskers.

Before she could react. Before she could scream or cry or pull out her kunai or keep staring, she was swept off her feet by a large hand. Hizashi-san tucked her under his arm, her cheek squished against Kiba’s shoulder; Tenten dangled from Hizashi-san’s other side clutching onto her storage scroll. “Hyuuga-san!” Kiba yelled as the house shuddered, “They threw smoke bombs through---”

Hizashi-san shunshined them to a patch of grass bordering cobblestone and a pond full of orange koi, ducking under a water dragon. He side-stepped a boulder rising from the ground, upending the nearby willows, and cursed as behind them, someone shouted, “There they are! To me! Don’t let them get away---” Hizashi-san shunshined again. The group landed on the other side of the Hyuuga gates and into the middle of a battle field. The first thing Sakura registered was the heat, the embers rising from the ruined houses, the mix of people running this way and that, some with purpose, some without. There was a robed man with a cane standing on top of a chimeric elephant-boar summon. He disappeared.

Sakura’s eyes widened. “Behind you---!”

All three members of Team 14 were flung to the opposite side of the street as Danzo-sama’s wind chakra leveled a small clearing where Hizashi-san previously stood. Sakura landed feet first onto a metalworks shop window and scrambled up onto the roof. Tenten unsealed her storage scroll and drew out three tan bundles. Sakura and Kiba hastily gathered their weapons and drew the jounin-standard cloaks over their shoulders. “I guess your weird habit finally helped us,” Kiba allowed, referring to how Tenten habitually arranged her weaponry and belongings around her within reach of wherever she sleeps.

Sakura peered through the cloud of smoke, hidden (for now) underneath Uzumaki seals. Danzo-sama’s summon forced Hizashi-san to retreat another block south. Danzo-sama was tapping his cane on the ground. Hizashi-san was shaking his head. Then, they were fighting again and the difference in skill was immediately obvious. Hizashi-san could… He is going to… He is losing. Inner Sakura prodded at a memory of the Uchiha compound. “Tenten,” Sakura hissed, “Namikaze-san’s kunai! Do you have it?”

(“Where are they?!” Danzo-sama demanded, unwrapping the bandages on his right arm. “Where are they?!” Hizashi-san spat blood at his sandals. “Tell me! Deny me further will not stop the inevitable, it’ll just make your end all the more painful.”)

Tenten jerked in response, “Oh! Oh, one moment… ah ha!” She pulled out a distinct three-pronged kunai, a gift from the man himself during Team 14’s mission with Mikoto-san. “Come on. Come on.” She pushed chakra into the handle and flung it to the ground as seals began to glow from the blade.

It didn’t occur to Sakura until then how far apart she had separated all the faces of Namikaze Minato: Kushina-san’s “sissy” husband, Naruto-kun’s “goofy” dad, Uchiha Fugaku’s “level headed” co-conspirator, the villager’s “heroic” Yellow Flash, and this…

“-destroyed our entire army before we could raise the alarm. That fucking demon,” railed a drunk Iwa shinobi at a small-town inn where Team 14 had gone undercover on a B ranked mission, “shouldn’t be called the Yellow Flash in the Bingo Book – too much red for such little yellow. You see – there is this one moment, this one second, where he arrives and he looks at you and he understands everything – his orders, his duty, his next move, our next move – and he executes it with this expression like… like it’s par of course, it’s why he exists – to murder the most in the least amount of time with the least amount of fuss, to inflict the most harm before we could retaliate. That sort of man shouldn't exist…”

“We shouldn’t be here,” Kiba whispered, tugging his two teammates back as it grew harder to breath. “Let’s go.”

(“Where’s my wife, Danzo?”)

“What? Where?” Sakura hissed back.

(“The question that you should be asking, Namikaze-san, isn't ‘where is my wife?’” Danzo-sama replied with a mild tone as he breathed wind chakra onto his kunai, held in a bloody grip, “Ask yourself this: Where had Konoha’s jinchuuriki gone for the past few days? Have you wondered at all?” And, impossibly, the very air around them grew even heavier.)

“Anywhere else,” Kiba kept pulling, a firm grip on both her and Tenten’s sleeves, “Just not here. You’re the smart one, Sakura. You know we can’t be here. We really, really can’t. Look, I smelled Sai-kun east towards the Hokage Rock. Let’s go there.”

Kiba was pleading; he was scared.

You’re the smart one, Sakura. Sakura’s laughter turned into hacking coughs. Since when had she ever been the smart one? Neji-sempai had been the smart one. But that’s OK because Sakura was everything else: the nice one, the stubborn one, the pink one. Then, later, Sakura had been the only one.

Team 14 leaped from rooftop to rooftop, an arm covering their eyes from falling embers, their cloaks hiding them from the attentions of Konoha ninjas fighting Konoha ninjas and Konoha ninjas killing Konoha ninjas. This was… worse than anything Sakura had ever experienced – worse than the Kumo crush, worse than the Akai Kori River incident, worse than the skirmishes on the Taki Border – because Sakura could see what used to be Ramen Ichiraku, Amaguriama, The Dango Shop, all perfect little craters. Places she knew, shops she visited, people she talked to… She scratched her arms, dragging her nails from shoulders to elbows, leaving behind raised welts. “Over there!” Kiba yelled as red fires turned into ink fires, rising from the stone mouths of past Hokages.

Sai-kun sat among two dead faceless ANBU bodies, a paintbrush in one hand, a dripping katana in another. Behind him was a mural of himself staring out into the street, a hexagram seal on his tongue. Team 14 pushed through the press of bodies with small elbows and the occasional glint of metal. The other ninjas paid them no heed, unable to discern their exact identities due to the nature of their cloaks but knowing enough to label them relatively harmless unless provoked. Two streets over, Kakashi-san leaped from mokuton branch to mokuton branch that spouted out of the cobblestone road that he took, his right hand noisy like a thousand chirping birds. Another kunoichi dodged a cloud of senbon only step into a field of caltrops.

Yet something was missing… In the din, Sakura could barely make out the words Sai-kun was muttering, “-sama had her so I freed her and she’s free and now there is no peace, but Shin’s death disturbed the first peace and I did all this for Shin but is this worth Shin---”

“Sai-kun? Sai-kun!” Tenten was the first to holler, first to reach him, first to offer her Uzumaki cloak. She slapped his face twice, “Can you stand up? Sai-kun, what happened?”

Sai-kun blinked twice, eyelashes fluttering over his cheeks – he had been crying. “They… found me. And made me stand in front of a lot of people. But the people were shouting.” He glanced down at his katana and tried to wipe it with the waistband of his pants. “And the Yellow Flash said ‘stop’ and then Danzo-sama said ‘you want this to happen now?’ and then it got even louder so I stopped listening and I ran away because too many people were asking questions and staring and grabbing.” Sakura glanced nervously behind her, very aware of their exposed position. There was a toad the size of a mountain, a snake blocking the entire side street, and a slug in the far distance battling a monkey, all towering over the multi-storied buildings like kids in a sandbox. The silhouette of the Kyuubi grew ever larger in the distance, nine tails sweeping across the horizon, smacking anyone who dared to cross its path. “I found the jinchuuriki underground in a cell a week ago with a sleeping release seal and I know enough,” he stuck out his tongue to reveal the hexagram seal, “of seals to open them now, to open her, and so I thought that this would change everything wrong by… I... I didn't think this would happen! I mean, I knew, but not this!”

Sakura’s eyes widened, for she saw what had been missing.

The battlefield had been missing Uchihas – because the Uchihas were all hanging off the Kyuubi’s neck by chakra strings like some elaborate necklace. The Kyuubi created a wake of rubble in its path emerging from columns of smoke with eyes like fire. “**There you are**,” it said as it saw them. Sakura blinked; she never heard a demon talk before. It felt like vibrations between her ribs, each syllable in her brain and eyes and shaking in that space between her sandals and the ground below. “**The one who freed me**.” Sai-kun did not react, having clasped his hands over his ears and squeezed his eyes shut tight. *Too much noise. Too many people.* “**Attend. I will lay eyes upon you and you will help me decide**.”

Decide what? The Kyuubi’s ears swiveled in her direction. *Ah. I said that out loud.*

“**Who is this?**”

Sakura shuffled in front of Sai-kun, blocking him from view, scratching at her arms with her fingernails. The Kyuubi was so close that she could make out her own self, huddled and barely standing, reflected in its fire pupils. “I-I…” *Watashi? Boku? If the Kyuubi uses washi and not ore, does this mean---* “am Haru-Haruno Sakura.” She bowed, albeit awkwardly considering how both Tenten and Kiba held her in a vice grip to stop her from taking another step forward. “It-It is nice to meet you! Uhhh. Sai-kun cannot talk to you right now so I will be talking in his place. Please excuse my rudeness! What name does Kyuubi-san use for itself?”

The Kyuubi shook its head and every Uchiha’s legs swayed in harmony. Up close, Sakura could make out the chakra strings arranged in an elaborate seal-collar extending from limb to limb which were arranged into the characters of storage, prison, fire, and death. She could make out Itachi-sensei, his parents, Izumi-san by the Kyuubi’s left shoulder, Shisui-sensei with his eyes scrunched up like when he had nightmares – *Sleeping. Somehow. But not dead.* “**You may call this one Kurama. There is no further need for introductions but**,” Kurama lowered its muzzle and stared at Team 14 through one eye. “**There is a need for you to know of my situation. This one is curious for your answer, Haruno Sakura.**” Sakura slowly nodded, feeling as if she had started an exam at the Academy.

She should be sitting at a wooden desk, tapping her pencil against her paper in anticipation. Instead, she snapped off a salute from genin to team commander, “Hai. I am ready.”

Kurama snorted. “**Very well. You will listen to the following.**" Kurama straightened, **"Once a seal is broken, it cannot be reused. It is already too late to escape the trappings of a new one.**” A single tail pointed behind towards the intersections of its bindings, towards an aged figure, barely the size of an ant, wearing a triangle hat, held aloft on a thousand chakra strings. “**The monkey has already sacrificed himself to the Shinigami.**” She flinched. *The Sandaime…* Inner Sakura wrung her hands. *Dead? Did we want that? Did we have the right to want that?* “**The Shinigami has forced my path to be single. Except your lot have forked the road, to your own detriment.**”

She tilted her head in confusion. “Ano… I don’t understand, Kurama-san.”

“**I am a beast that should not ever be contained by human ambition, and yet circumstances allow it to be so. This beast is stopped by two ropes, one attached to a toad and another to a chimera, each pulling in opposite directions, two instigators that I have no patience for. Human ambition constantly splits humanity itself. Now, my question is this.**” Kurama bared its teeth. “**What is the beast to do?**”

Sakura could barely understand the wordplay Kurama-san enjoyed. She tried to swallow but found her mouth dry and chalky. On the left perched atop a fourth-floor balcony among shattered pots was Namikaze Minato-san, bloody and tired. *Pick me* – he seemed to say with the clenched hands, his three-pronged kunai, and burnt shoulder. On the right perched atop a shingled rooftop among bricks and glass was Shimura Danzo-sama, bloody and tired. *Pick me* – he seemed to say with an armful of eyes, torn robes, and slight limp. Inner Sakura wrote her name and date on the imaginary exam paper in the imaginary Academy and decided her answer.

What is the beast to do?

She pointed accusingly, even as Tenten hissed in disbelief at her audacity, “You know what my answer shoulder be, Kurama-san,” she declared like she was conversing with a peer. “You know I want you to choose the Yellow Flash. I bet you already know why.”

Kurama shook its head, its binding seal made of Uchihas trembling in their places. For a belated moment, she wondered how it came to be like this. What were the key events to result in this horror? How an entire clan was used for the good of the village, to make sure a tailed-beast does not rampage through multiple sectors. She wondered what finally pushed Sai-kun over the edge to action. She wondered what she was hoping to accomplish facing down an entity made of corrosive chakra. “**Your human interactions hold little meaning in my opinion but yes, I am forced to be made aware of your games and your stories. All beneath me. I assure you.**” Kurama’s grin grew wider and Sakura wondered how much Kushina-san forced it to learn and remember. “**Is the Yellow Flash your answer?**”

She quickly shook her head. “No. No. That answer is what I want. But for you, Kurama-san… Umm…” She clapped her hands. “It’s like this. You feel mad and sad and lost because you’re trapped like this. There is only to survive or die, one or two, in or out, just two choices and they act like they’re trying to help you and you should be grateful for so many liberties

but it's not. It's not like what they're pretending at all. And I was like that ever since I got that envelope even if I didn't realize it till way, way later. They wondered why I wasn't smiling. The reason why is because I shouldn't." She drew a deep breath. "I should be screaming and kicking and biting and fighting back. But I didn't know that I could do that. You could do that."

"**Screaming and kicking and biting?**"

She bobbed her head proudly. "Un! Forging another path that no one tried before! You make your own nindo! Except," she quailed under its skeptical eye, "I don't think you have a nindo. You're not a ninja, Kurama-san. But maybe you have something close."

"**And you believe this feasible.**"

"Of course, you can. You're the Kyuubi no Youko, right? I believe in you!" She gave a thumbs up. "Only." She wilted again, scratching at her arms, "It'll be nice if you don't kill anyone. Please?" She held her ground in her spot in front of Tenten and Kiba who held their breaths as Kurama's tailed stilled, its ears flickering here and there, in front of Sai-kun who had long removed himself from the sensory overload of his surroundings, having done his own self-designated job, now vulnerable to those who still want his head for his actions.

"**Hmm…"** Everyone listening held their breaths as it deliberated for seconds that felt like days, months, years. "**It is a good answer. It is a novel suggestion that I shall begin implementing.**" Seven of Kurama's tails began to sway like hypnotic ribbons, weaving an area of effect genjutsu around them, part barrier, part illusion. The other two tails clamped onto each chain connecting it to Namikaze-san and Danzo-sama who were shouting words she couldn't hear. A lot of adults nearby were shouting at her like she was in big trouble. They couldn't stop her because of Kurama's tails. She didn't care. None of them were mama and papa, and only their opinion mattered here. At least they would tell her that she did the right thing. They would, with lots of crying. "**And as I accomplish this task, what will you do after this?**"

"Well." She drew out slowly, "I'm not done yet. I'll keep changing things, even the biggest things, with the smallest actions. What you do shouldn't make me do anything different. … Much. I'll have help."

"**What will you give to achieve your peace?"**

What an easy question. Sakura was an old hat to the concept of sacrifice in all its good parts and bad. "Everything."

Kurama hummed, a low reverberation in her chest, as it leaked red chakra from its body like a sieve, its seal made of Uchihas glowing blindingly white. Its chakra pooled in various invisible pockets in the air, hovering, waiting. "**A third door unseen unless there was a favorite – unless I had a preference. Naturally, I had no opinion until now. An opinion, wanting as an action, is a gift. And here is one for you, Haruno Sakura. This might help.**" For the Kyuubi must always be sealed – that is unpreventable. But there was still potential path to forge. "**I am curious to see what a human like you, who will give everything, will do with this.**"

Its itchy chakra swirled once around them before, without warning, surged forward in the formation of eight trigrams, slamming into her stomach. She felt the burn through her shirt and mesh armor, breath punched out of her as she folded over. One of her teammates caught her but she couldn't tell who for her vision was beginning to blur at the edges with red. Someone was screaming her name.

"**How interesting. It is not every day that I get to choose my own jailer**."

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Epilogue

Mikoto-san handed her a ceramic cup, hot to the touch, steam making uzumaki whorls in the air. After thanking the woman, Sakura took a hesitant sip and tasted chrysanthemums just as the peace was interrupted by off-key singing and approaching footsteps from the third member.

“Picked from the gardens here,” Kushina-san bragged, accepting the empty chair on Sakura’s left, “By my own two hands. I’m getting the hang of this green thumb at the shrine stuff!” She arranged her traditional wear of haori and hakama in their non-traditional colors of orange about her as she plopped her sandal-less feet onto the table, ignoring Mikoto-san’s disparaging look with the power of friendship. “Chrysanthemum is yin, ya know, so it should reduce inflammation and calm your nerves for your big day today!” She poked Sakura’s side, “Neh. Neh. Are you excited?”

Sakura fiddled with her cup, “I should already know all the people who could be on this team. It’s not like I’m meeting anyone new. Why should I be excited?”

“Ahh,” Kushina-san groaned, “Teenagers are no fun.”

Sakura stared, “I’m twelve.” She argued, “Teenagers are older. Like you.”

“Well if you ask Inoichi-san, teenage-hood is technically a state of mind and not really… wait. Wait! I’m not old!” Kushina-san protested, fixating on the single phrase. “Are you calling me old?!”

“Most assuredly not,” Mikoto-san muttered before Sakura could give assent and poured her friend a cup, promptly shoving it in Kushina-san’s face before real indignation could erupt. “We are veering off topic.” She smiled benevolently at Sakura, squinted eyes and a stretched mouth without teeth, “what she means here, Sakura-chan, is that today marks a new chapter of your life, if you will accept that metaphor. This is a day of placing the past behind and the future ahead.”

“Spoken with far more eloquence than what I could ever accomplish,” Kushina-san offered a thumbs up at the other woman who daintily sipped from her cup. “Though I’m getting better at all the graceful things. You saw me when I first started, tripped over my geta every five minutes and spilled more than half of the tea at every ceremony. Mina-chan kept teasing me. Now I have all the time in the world.” She rubbed the three tenketsu points on her right wrist as she stared wistfully ahead, thinking of her earlier life, just years ago, when she had chakra running in her meridians.

“Ahh,” Sakura wilted with guilt, pressing a hand over her stomach, as, not for the first time, Kushina-san rushed to assure her that the results of that night, that night of itchy chakra and final battles like in the second to last chapter of *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja*, were not her fault.

“No blame! No blame!” Kushina-san insisted, “We’ve done the best in a bad situation! I’m still alive, by some miracle of fate and will of the Sage, alive and kicking. No chakra - but still kicking ass! I’ve so much free time to master tea ceremonies and sacred cleansings and the Kagura dance, ya know! Sometimes I just like to think back on that part of my life but I’m not feeling like a --- Oh no, are you crying? Please don’t cry. I’m not good with people crying. I laugh every time Mina-chan cries.”

“You laughed every time Naruto-kun cries.” Mikoto-san added.

“Oh hush. You laughed every time Sasuke-kun cries, ya know. Now. Sakura-chan, look over here. Stop covering your face… and… and… you’re smiling! Good!” Kushina-san cheered as Mikoto-san’s eyes landed on the placement of Sakura’s other hand.

“Why are you covering your front?” Mikoto-san’s brows furrowed with worry. “Is the Kyuubi still mad that we don’t know who the characters of its stories are or the location of the great tree?”

Sakura shook her head, “Kurama is like an old man, like Kakashi-san,” she explained, and both women did a spit-take into their tea, “and old men like to wake up early with the sun and take afternoon naps.”

“Ah. Why do you think Kakashi-kun is an old man?”

Sakura blinked, nonplussed at the honorific. “His hair is white.” She ticked off the reasons on her fingers. “He slouches like he has back problems. He talks slowly. When he talks he uses all the idioms that only old people know. He reads old man porn. Underneath his mask is probably a lot of yellowed teeth and wrinkles deep like canyons. And he was late to my afternoon training session last week.” Then she asked with much doubt, "Is he... not old?"

“Old men and women typically retire from active duty.”

“But they can still fight,” she argued back. “Like Danzo-sama when he was fighting Hyuuga-san and then the Yellow Flash. Like Sandaime-sama when he made the eight trigrams seal with chakra strings and the Uchiha clan and sacrificed his soul because…” She trailed off, because she still didn’t know the reason why the Sandaime did what he did in his final moments when for all the years before he neglected his people, sticking his head in the sand like a coward. Kushina-san had told her, a long time ago, that no one really understands what goes on in a Hokage’s mind.

“The moment they wear that hat, the hat changes them,” she had explained in a rare moment of wisdom, “They see and hear things differently. They perceive events and make orders in the manners of greater good and needs must and my hands are tied. Hokages are all about balancing the now and the eventually, the bonds between villages with the bonds to the village with the bonds to the people in the village.” She had seesawed her hand, “bad hokages

eventually ignore one part of the whole because they're tired and sad and want the world to be easier. But the world isn't easy."

"Would the Yellow Flash eventually become a bad hokage?" Sakura had asked.

Kushina-san had looked like she was about to laugh from such a *silly question. Mina-chan cries rivers when Kakashi-kun's puppies get sick. He would never be bad.* But then the older villagers like Teuchi-san from Ichiraku's Ramen could say the same for the Sandaime, who was once young and bright eyed and had a fearsome yet kind of stupid nickname like 'Yellow Flash' and wanted his precious people safe. Kushina-san had sighed, "Mina-chan would give his life and soul for the village, like the Sandaime, make no mistake. That willingness to sacrifice is a character seen in all of our hokages. But Mina-chan also has people like you and me and Inoichi-chi and a whole lot of other people in Konohakagure to give him eyes to look at things our way. I think, eventually, the war took all of that from Sarutobi-san… the Sandaime." Kushina-san had corrected when Sakura tilted her head in confusion.

The three people at the table stared at their respective teacups as the lapse in the conversation grew into a comfortable silence. There was still four hours left before Sakura was meant to report to the Academy for her new team assignment, this one supposedly more permanent than her previous ones. The Yellow Flash had assured her, stupid triangle hat and all, that the new teams didn't mean that Team 14 was forever disbanded, just that she and Tenten and Kiba needed to *expand your horizons and work with other kids your age. It's good for you*.

"Besides, Fridays with egg fried rice at the Inuzuka compound will always be a thing!" Kiba had insisted when Sakura had burst into tears. "Hana will drag you to the table of you guys are late like she does with Itachi-sensei and his family."

Mikoto-san poured her another cup. Sakura thanked her and sipped the brew even slower than she had with her first pour, allowing the stray flower petal to stick to her tongue and the slight wind to brush against her hair, whispering into her ears.

She could've, would've fallen asleep within the half hour if it wasn't for the sudden crash coming from the nearby hot springs and the subsequent enraged screeching of many women.

"Ah," Mikoto-san murmured, "the Frog Sage finally returns home."

"Toad," Kushina-san corrected. Mikoto-san sniffed.

Sakura perked up like Akamaru and Kiba inhaling the scent of cooked pork belly as the screeching was accompanied by old man laughter, "Toad Sage? You mean Jiraiya-sama the author!" She stood up so fast her chair fell over, "Where is he?!"

"What? Stop. Wait! Sakura-chan---"

But their protests fell onto willingly deaf ears. Sakura whipped out her much beloved and dog-eared copy of *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja* from her pack and waved it about like a flag, "Do you know how long I've been waiting to meet him? Every time I hear that he's in the village, Tsunade-sama or Orochimaru-sama always gives me missions on the other side of

the main gates and once, mama grounded me for breathing too loudly and didn't let me out of the house for the day!"

"I wonder why," Kushina-san muttered. Then she said in a louder voice, "You do know of his less than stellar reputation? Didn't your parents ever warn you that he's a…" She coughed. "A pervert?"

Sakura sniffed, not unlike Mikoto-san. "Orochimaru-sama said that he's *not merely a pervert, oh no, he is not so mundane as that. He is a super-pervert.* But I need Jiraiya-sama's autograph." She waved Kushina-san's argument away like an annoying fly. Kushina-san coughed even harder, "and that's more important. Besides, an autograph takes ten seconds at most? What can he do with ten seconds?"

Mikoto-san glanced heavenward. "Quite a lot if we're using Kakashi-kun as an example."

"I'll punch him if he tries anything," Sakura offered.

"That's the spirit," Kushina-san applauded. "But no. You're not allowed to meet him until you're a tokubetsu jounin. Or until he agrees to oversee Naruto's apprenticeship with Mina-chan's insistence, in which I will have more problems than him corrupting the minds of innocent young girls." Sakura pouted. "Don't look so glum! You're already a chunin! Just a couple more months of honing that chakra control of yours and Tsunade-sama will be dragging you off to the rank elevation sponsorship paperwork. Now," Kushina-san peered up at the slight overcast sky, "I'm going to tuck this little package of chrysanthemum tea into your pocket as a gift and then I'm going to walk you over to your parents to say hi. Then, when the time is right, you'll head over to the Academy for your little surprise. Yes? Awesome!"

Real suspicious. Inner Sakura grumbled, eyeing the way Kushina-san smiled, entirely fox-like. *She knows something and whatever she knows that we don't, she thinks is hilarious.* But what could Sakura herself do in this situation?

So, Sakura walked slowly, escorted by Kushina-san who diverted her away from the hot springs, hopped and skipped down the lane. Kushina-san ruffled her hair at her door step in good-bye. Inside, mama was finishing the last of the sponge cake in the fridge and papa was taking his afternoon nap on his favorite chair. "My beloved daughter is growing up," mama whispered with tears in her eyes as Sakura kissed her cheek and then papa's whiskers, softly so he wouldn't wake. "I'm- We're so proud of you."

Mama made her congee, mixing a packet of nutritious protein powders into the bowl and topping it off with scallions, a common staple meal in the Haruno family after Tsunade pinched at her arms during her annual and made a tsk tsk noise. (Mama had cried when Sakura, after the first spoonful, told her that the taste wasn't bad at all because it reminded her of ration bars.) Papa eventually woke up and packed her ninja bag with the usual gear plus four onigiri for her to share with her new team and sensei.

The backpack was as pink as her hair, plastered with little yellow cats batting at red yarn. She felt like she was five again, almost six, on her first day to the Ninja Academy. *You are going to the Academy*. Inner pointed out. *At least you won't be alone this time*.

Yeah. Sakura thought happily. This time she would be with Tenten and Kiba. Itachi-sensei would be hiding behind a tree and everyone else would pretend that they don't see him. Sai-kun would be hiding in another tree and everyone would "find" him after their team meetings and go eat Ichiraku's.

With those thoughts and a peek at the windows, she ran down the hallways, dodging the Academy teacher who remained after hours, giggling as they yelled at her to slow down or else she gets detention. She skidded to a stop in front of the designated classroom door and saw her team and Iruka-sensei waiting for her. Iruka-sensei handed them each a piece of paper with a location written in. Kiba and Tenten were to go to training grounds 4 and 9 respectively. Sakura's just said *rooftop*. "Good luck," Iruka-sensei offered before they dispersed.

According to Hana-san, Kiba was going to be on a team with Hyuuga Hinata and Aburame Shino. Orochimaru-sama had said that Tenten was going to be on a two-man team with *twin green nightmares of Konoha. If you would like to reconsider your decision of an apprenticeship under me, Tenten, you only need to ask.* Nobody hinted to Sakura who she was going to be grouped with but the way Iruka-sensei was looking at her with a "whoops" smile didn't bode well.

At the doorway, Kiba glanced back over his shoulder and mouthed the words, "Fried rice Fridays."

Sakura shook her head and took a moment to muse about fate and the many strings pulling many people into action. *It's not really a destiny of hatred, isn't it, Neji-sempai? Nothing is inevitable – you make what you choose.* With that thought, she opened a window and pulled herself onto the Academy rooftops with chakra enhanced grip. The high-noon sun blinded her momentarily as she peered over, fingers digging into the ledge. By her right, as her eyes adjusted, next to the generator, a tall silhouette swayed and condensed and defined into someone familiar.

She blinked.

"Kakashi-san?" Kakashi-san gave a lazy wave with his right hand – *stiff, probably still healing from a recent mission*. Inner idly observed before doing a double take. *Wait. What.* "Kakashi-san??? You're the assigned sensei for Team 7?"

"Mahhh," he snapped his orange book shut, "You don't have to sound so horrified, Sakura-chan."

"Iruka-sensei would never allow this. He hates your guts," she protested, checking the surroundings for a genjutsu. "Did the Yellow Flash set you up for this? I thought you hated teaching."

"Umino-kun's feelings for me are heady and very complicated and very much not your business. I may, dislike teaching, for hate is such a strong verb, but this is the dream team," Kakashi-san…sensei… *sensei???* mock sighed happily, clapping in that way that means he was making fun of her, "And it's the Yondaime now – you can't keep calling him the Yellow Flash. It's been five years." Sakura stuck out her tongue. "Hmmm. Did he not inform you of

your teammates?" He appeared in front of her to ruffle her hair, "Then I will tell you. It's Naruto-kun and Sasuke-kun. How exciting!"

No wonder Kushina-san was laughing. *We're stuck with HIM*, Inner gestured in the general direction of Hatake Kakashi-san*, until our other teammates make chunin. And if our teammates are Naruto-kun and Sasuke-kun...* Sakura had seen the two boys spar - the pride of their clan. Well, not really spar – more like grappling in the mud and pulling on hair. She couldn't imagine them ever becoming chunin. *Sage help us. We'll be with Kakashi-san forever.*

"You," she hissed, bristling and poking at his book. "You can't be our sensei. That's…" She faltered, searching for a reason, "if Naruto-kun and Sasuke-kun are here, then that's nepotism!"

"Happy to see your vocabulary has improved since I saw you struggling to write mission reports," he leaned down and eye-smiled. "And don't forget! If me becoming their sensei is nepotism, then me becoming your sensei is also nepotism! We can all be one happy, not-related, nepotistic family! Why it seemed like just yesterday when I attended your twelfth birthday! I gave you your favorite new sandals which I see you are wearing right now because I have such great taste. In that way, I'm practically your big brother!" Sakura blanched. "Such love from my beloved, tiny sister – it makes my heart go doki doki."

"Last week you ambushed me by Yamanaka Flowers and threw me across the street because my reflexes weren't fast enough!"

"Why are you less cute?" He continued as if he didn't hear her accusations, "When you were six, you were adorable. Now you're growing into a rude teenager… Such disrespect!"

"And then you said," her voice grew shrill as she continued over him, "after I kept begging you, that you would finally properly train me but then you were late for two hours and then you set your clones on me like I can't even-" She puffed her cheeks in anger when outrage overcame her ability to talk.

He tapped his chin over his mask. "Such a productive time together! Everything I do for you is for your own good. It's training! It's how you passed the chunin exams with flying colors, you see – all of our practices on your… ah… adaptability and reactions. See how effective it was? Hmmm. I should incorporate more---"

"Shannaro!"

That's how Naruto-kun and Sasuke-kun found them: her lunging, fingers curled into claws, trying to land a hit at his knees and him twisting his body this way and that to dodge her attempts.

"Hey, Sakura-chan! You're our third teammate! Awesome!" Naruto-kun cheered, pumping a fist into the air. Sakura tripped in surprise and Kakashi-san took the opportunity to grab her by the back of her collar and give her a good shake, like he would do with the Inuzuka puppies. "Sasuke-teme and I thought that it was going to be some lame person. You're not lame at all -ttebayo!" Sasuke-kun grunted and closed the stairwell door behind him.

They stood side by side, fidgeting nervously, subjecting themselves to her and Kakashi-san's inspection. Sakura wondered how her old teammates were with their new teammates. She sighed as the mood quickly grew serious; Kakashi-san set her down on her feet. Then, she took a deep breath.

"Fried rice Fridays," Kiba had promised.

“--- a new chapter of your life.” Mikoto-san had said, “This is a day of placing the past behind and the future ahead.” *Past behind. Future ahead.*

Deep in the seals overlaying her stomach, Kurama awoke, yawned, and stretched. *What will you give to achieve your peace?*

Everything.

“Yeah,” she clenched her hands and nodded, “It's me - Haruno Sakura. Welcome to Team 7.”

Chapter End Notes

Extra: Kakashi-sensei clapped his hands. “Alright, introductions then. Please give me your likes, dislikes, hobbies, and dreams for the future. …Sakura-chan, why are you laughing?”

Entire story inspired by: The Haunting of Hill House (Netflix) and The Book Thief (Markus Zusak). Thanks for reading!

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